

## Fight for Life: Dave Kashtan's Memories of Depression-Era Communist Youth Work

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# NOTE AND DOCUMENT

## ‘Fight for Life’: Dave Kashtan’s Memories of Depression-Era Communist Youth Work

Kirk Niergarth

BEFORE HIS EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY Dave Kashtan became a Communist and so, in some respects, his partial and posthumous memoir is unsurprising. Public demonstrations and state repression, organization and strikes, time spent in a Soviet school and in a Quebec prison, Party meetings and police informants — all these Kashtan remembers, but only as part of a larger story: about growing up in a diverse and working-class Montreal; about workers’ sports and left-wing culture; about the friendships and fellowship of social activism; and about the ideals shared by many Canadian youth in the 1930s that superseded political, ethnic, and religious differences. Kashtan readily admits that his political commitments were exceptional, but his experience, in its totality, had much in common with many young Canadians radicalized in the years of Depression and war.

What Kashtan has here brought together, disciplinary specialization will quickly tear asunder. Historians of Canadian immigrants, Jews, childhood, sports, labour, youth movements, the penal system, and the Canadian left will all find different passages to note, to interrogate, and to incorporate into their many narratives of Canadian life in the first half of the 20th century. This dissection, however, may obscure the larger point the memoir seeks to convey. Kashtan contends that though his experiences were various, they were not incongruous; that his cultural, political, social, religious, and athletic involvements and commitments were not compartmentalized, but were knit together in the broader life of the working class and the left.

Kirk Niergarth, “‘Fight for Life’: Dave Kashtan’s Memories of Depression-Era Communist Youth Work,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 199-236.

Kashtan's recollection of his childhood makes his commitment to socialism understandable. His father, a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant, lost his position as an assistant foreman in a cigarette factory because he supported his fellow workers. This gesture of class solidarity came at great personal cost to the Kashtan family. Kashtan remembers the struggles his parents faced — watching his mother count her piece-work tags, nursing his father after a beating sustained by anti-union thugs — and to these he adds his own personal experience of dangerous working conditions, arbitrary dismissal, and inadequate wages encountered when he entered the labour force before his thirteenth birthday.

Class conflict was not the only social confrontation Kashtan encountered during his early years in Montreal. He recounts incidents of anti-Semitism which reflect the ethnic, religious, and linguistic divisions within his working-class neighbourhood. Notable is Kashtan's description of how these tensions were mediated amongst the neighbourhood's children through forms of play.

As Kashtan learned labour politics from his father, he also was taught to take pride in his Jewish heritage. In one instance, after hearing Kashtan recite lines from Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* for homework, his father explained to him the connection between anti-Semitism and the dominant forces in society. One wonders if the lines in question were those in which the "paleface" visitors explain their theology to Hiawatha's village:

Then the Black-Robe chief, the Prophet,  
Told his message to the people,  
Told the purport of his mission,  
Told them of the Virgin Mary,  
And her blessed Son, the Saviour,  
.....  
How the Jews, the tribe accursed,  
Mocked him, scourged him, crucified him;  
How he rose from where they laid him,  
Walked again with his disciples,  
And ascended into heaven.<sup>1</sup>

It is unlikely that Kashtan had to memorize lines like these after his family moved and he had been enrolled in the Jewish school on Cadieux Street, where he recollects being taught histories of class struggle. Later memories, like Kashtan's role in helping unite the Young Communist League [YCL] with the Young Men's Hebrew Association in a joint demonstration protesting a Nazi battleship's visit to Montreal, show the continuing intersection of his Judaism and his radicalism.

Having been forced from school by poverty and driven to accept a series of dead-end jobs, Kashtan became involved with the Young Communist League

<sup>1</sup>Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha* (New York 1855 [1898]), 251-52.

through the influence of his brother Bill, who later led the Communist Party of Canada [CPC]. It is worth noting that Kashtan began his journey to political activism through cultural activities: a mandolin orchestra, a summer camp, and other social, intellectual, and athletic activities of the Young Pioneers and the YCL. Kashtan highly valued the educational opportunities these organizations afforded him and through discussion and reading began to participate in the intellectual life of the left. With Kashtan's prominent involvement in the Workers Sports Association<sup>2</sup> and his future wife Rose Eizenstrauss's involvement in the theatricals of the Progressive Arts Club, we begin to appreciate the importance of cultural activities for this generation of youthful leftists.

The left-wing culture Kashtan recalls, however, bears little resemblance to the mechanical, Stalin-approved realism the CPC has been caricatured as favouring. As many references in the following memoir indicate — from the songs of the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW] to Beethoven, from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Pauline Johnson by way of Jack London and George Bernard Shaw — reductionist dichotomizations of high/low, elite/popular, bourgeois/working-class texts fail to capture the cultural complexity of working-class and left formations in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

As an organizer for the Young Communist League, Kashtan faced rather different occupational hazards than he had in his previous jobs. In 1931, he was sentenced to a year in prison as a result of his agitation on behalf of the unemployed. Kashtan effectively juxtaposes the light-hearted banter of the judges who denied his appeal, with the desperate conditions he faced during his incarceration at Bordeaux. Upon release, at least one of those who was sentenced with Kashtan would have nothing more to do with the Communist Party and Kashtan's recollections are sufficiently gruesome to illustrate how effective a tool imprisonment could be in the state's repression of dissent.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>As Kashtan notes, this part of his story is featured in Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto 1996), 146-84.

<sup>3</sup>James Doyle's *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo 2002) is a useful recent text, but sticks too closely to the cultural "Party line" to fully voice the range of cultural production and reception of Canadian Communists. American scholars have recently begun to explore this range in the CPUSA with works like Andrew Hemingway's *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven 2002) and Alan Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill 2002). Bryan D. Palmer provides a thorough review of Doyle's work and useful map of the terrain that remains to be explored in the Canadian context in "Rhyming Reds and Fractious Fictions: Canada's Heritage of Literary Radicalism," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 34 (Spring 2004), 99-128.

<sup>4</sup>Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934* (St. John's 1993), Bulletin no. 732, 14 November 1934, 394.

In remembering his politics, Kashtan seems most comfortable with the inclusive anti-fascism of the CPC's "Popular Front" period, 1935-1939.<sup>5</sup> This hindsight is consistent with the RCMP's observations of Kashtan's activities. In the summer of 1934, he was observed speaking at an anti-fascist demonstration at Fletcher's Field, and, as the result of another demonstration, was granted an audience with the German Consul. The meeting with the Consul, according to the RCMP, led to the following proposition: "In order to prove to them their complete ignorance of German affairs, [the Consul] offered to pay half the expenses of any one of the delegates for a trip to Germany so that he might see things for himself."<sup>6</sup> As tempting as a discount ticket to Nazi Germany must have been to a Jewish Communist, Kashtan turned the Consul down.

Kashtan recalls with pride the YCL's inclusive youth centres, which were typical of the aspirations of the Popular Front in their abolition of rigid structures and dogmatism. While the memoir does not mention Kashtan's involvement with the Canadian Youth Congress [CYC], the RCMP security bulletins reveal him to have been an enthusiastic proponent and key organizer.<sup>7</sup> The CYC, which held annual meetings beginning in 1935, attracted delegates from a wide range of political, religious, and labour organizations and must certainly be considered one of the most successful initiatives of the Canadian Popular Front.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>John Manley has produced the best works on the CPC's Popular Front period. His introduction, "From United Front to Popular Front: The CPC in 1936," to Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part III, 1936* (St. John's 1996), 1-24, with its focus on the youth activities of the Party (16-23), is perhaps most relevant to Kashtan's story, but his other works are also well worth reading, including "'Communists Love Canada': The Communist Party of Canada, the 'People' and the Popular Front, 1933-1939," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 36 (Winter 2001-2002), 59-86, and "'Audacity, audacity, still more audacity': Tim Buck, the Party, and the People, 1932-1939," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 9-41.

<sup>6</sup>Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934*, Bulletin no. 716, 25 July 1934, 164. The Fletcher's Field demonstration is described in the same volume, Bulletin no. 719, 15 August 1934, 205.

<sup>7</sup>Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part III, 1936*, Bulletin no. 804, 29 April 1936, 185; Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part IV, 1937* (St. John's 1997) Bulletin no. 859, 10 June 1937, 239, and Bulletin no. 875, 4 November 1937, 447-48; Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part V, 1938-1939* (St. John's 1997) Bulletin no. 890, 3 May 1938, 146; Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The War Series 1939-1941* (St. John's 1989) Bulletin no. 20, 4 March 1940, 165-66.

<sup>8</sup>Violet Anderson reported on the 1936 Congress in *Saturday Night*: "Delegates from all over Canada came to this Congress, representing religious, political, occupational, cultural and recreational organizations ... the United Church delegation was the largest group representing any single organization. Other religious bodies were represented, among them the Anglican Young People, the Unitarians, Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers, and Jews. The two main political parties had delegates there, though a larger representation came from the

By contrast, in 1934, Kashtan got an unflattering review from the RCMP when he was called upon to speak at a meeting commemorating the seventeenth anniversary of the formation of the USSR. After speeches unfavourably comparing Canada with the Soviet Union and offering revolutionary greetings to Stalin and the Red Army, the RCMP reported, “Dave Kashtan, of the Young Communist League, was the next speaker. He was not well prepared and his speech was chiefly an appeal to the younger element to take their part in the working class struggle.”<sup>9</sup> One wonders whether what the informant perceived as lack of preparedness may have indicated some hesitancy on Kashtan’s part. Kashtan’s personal experience in the Soviet Union was not without ambiguity — he certainly noticed signs of violence and deprivation alongside what seemed to be immensely impressive industrial, social, and educational developments. In later years, Kashtan must have wondered, as readers of this memoir will, what became of the three women who spat at his feet when he gave a speech about Canadian deprivation while visiting a Soviet collective farm.

There is no evidence, however, that Kashtan had misgivings about the Soviet leadership of the Communist International in this period. As the following two Security Bulletin passages illustrate, Kashtan was able to follow the Party in its abrupt reversal of position following the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. The first is from September 1938:

On September 16th the Young Communist League at Toronto held a meeting at the corner of College Street and Brunswick Avenue protesting German interference in Czechoslovakia. An effigy of Hitler was “hanged” on a limb of a tree amidst shouts of the crowd and the speakers, including Dave Kashtan, National Secretary of the YCL of Canada, scoured the Chamberlain policy of appeasement, urging that the Canadian Government “must” immediately take action against German aggression in Czechoslovakia.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, from January 1940, we have this description of a YCL publication:

The leaflet was written by Sam Walsh and Dave Kashtan. [deletion: 2 lines] The leaflet is entitled “Youth must Fight for Life, Not Die For Profits.”... Under the sub-title “Lest We Forget”, the article states, “In 1914-18 our fathers were led and conscripted into the terrible

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Canadian Cooperative Youth Movement and the Young Communist League. There was a delegation of fifty from the various Ys. Eighteen French-Canadian organizations were represented, sixteen Youth Councils, and twenty-three cultural and recreational organizations. The interests of the League of Nations Society, of unions, farmers, unemployed, cooperatives, and even of children, all had their exponents.” Violet Anderson, “Youth of Canada Examines its World,” *Saturday Night*, 6 June 1936. Communist involvement in the Congress is discussed in Manley, “From United Front to Popular Front.”

<sup>9</sup>Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934*, Bulletin no. 732, 14 November 1934, 384.

<sup>10</sup>Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part V, 1938-1939*, 289.

slaughter of imperialist war under the false slogans of 'save democracy', 'a war to end all wars', 'a land fit for heroes to live in.' Now again we are expected to uphold an empire that holds 500,000,000 human beings in virtual slavery, to defend capitalism, which breeds imperialist war and poverty for the people.....It is a brutal, unjust robber war of rival imperialisms."<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately (but perhaps not coincidentally), Kashtan's memoir does not extend far enough to explain why he was willing to accept the Party line in the early months of World War II — and we do not know when, if ever, his commitment to the Communist Party of Canada ended.

One senses that Kashtan remained proud of his efforts to promote the rights of the unemployed, to build workers' sports organizations, and to unite many diverse voices in protesting the rise of Fascism during the 1930s. Kashtan's desire to write and publish this memoir suggests he believed his experiences would continue to be instructive and relevant to later generations of activists who, as his title indicates, must learn how best to live in their own times.

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There is a hazard in editing a posthumous autobiography, since the final draft can no longer be subject to the author's approval. I tried, therefore, to make as few changes as possible under the circumstances. The circumstances were, however, that this memoir was still a fairly early draft and that its length left it awkwardly positioned between journal and monograph publication.

It was obvious that Kashtan had done considerable reading and research in order to contextualize his own memories. In shortening his work, I targeted this secondary material, trusting that readers of this journal will be sufficiently familiar with the basic historical context of the events described. I preserved as many of Kashtan's own comments and recollections about his experiences as space limitations would permit.

I made some small changes to Kashtan's organization to improve the narrative flow and I added two editorial footnotes; all of the other notes are Kashtan's. I also chose to correct the few grammatical errors I found, revise some awkward syntax, and alter the text to observe the stylistic preferences of this journal. As the memoir illustrates, with little formal education Kashtan became a highly sophisticated reader and communicator and so I saw no reason to discount this sophistication by preserving the careless errors of an early draft.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The War Series 1939-1941*, 117-18.

<sup>12</sup>I have followed a similar procedure to that described by Bryan Palmer in his introduction to Jack Scott's autobiography. Bryan Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers' Movement, 1927-1985* (St. John's 1989).

I have not verified Kashtan's dates, statistics, nor the accuracy of his quotations. What follows is Dave Kashtan's account of his own life as he chose to remember and record it.

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## Dave Kashtan *Living in One's Own Time: A Memoir from the Left*

*This memoir is dedicated to the memory of Rose Eizenstrauss Kashtan with whom I shared my life for more than fifty-five years. It was her love, understanding, and support that enriched the meaning of our lives. Her words inspired the title I have chosen: "We could be considered ahead of our times, but also a part of our time."<sup>13</sup>*

### *Introduction*

MY STORY is not solely that of an individual but shows how the conditions of the time impacted the lives of those young people who shared experiences in the working-class movement. We made our choices on domestic and world issues facing the most extreme conditions the 20th century had to offer. There was a reaching out for something more than the recognition of the unpleasantness in society. We believed that we had the alternative answers to the building of a better social system.

Like other memoirs, mine owes its origin to a special occasion which inspired the telling. The occasion was an interview with a well-known sports historian who was researching a paper concerning the Workers Sports Association of Canada, an organization with which I was closely associated in the 1930s.

Although historians are fascinated with the roles played by the political parties of the left in the thirties and forties, scant attention has been given to the youth organizations which they sponsored. For this reason, this historian's first question to me was unexpected. He said, "You were a Young Communist League organizer in Montreal in the thirties and were facing trial in the Montreal courts charged with sedition: How was it possible for you at the time to undertake the responsibility to participate in the formation of the national structure of the WSA of Canada?"

To recreate personal experiences required more than simple affirmation. I was motivated to write about my time in the YCL and the response of a communist youth organization to the political/social issues of those years. These issues revealed the depth of the class divisions in the country, a condition our national myths used to

<sup>13</sup>Rose was one of the founding members of the New Theatre Group in Montreal in the early 1930s. She also was part of the Belmont Theatre Group in Toronto and the Theatre of Action. This quotation appeared in the book *Theatre of the Left*.



tell us were unknown to Canada. These divisions were generated by the very nature of the social system.

In the year I was born, 1912, King George V reigned over us in the Dominion of Canada. In my sixth grade, our teacher Miss Fultz, concerned with helping her class prepare for the approaching geography exam, emphasized that “wherever you see the colour red on the world map, remember all of this is part of the British Empire.” How society viewed the colour RED and red influences changed a great deal over the course of my lifetime!

### *Beginnings*

The first twenty-six years of my life were lived in Montreal and my earliest recollections are of the time when our family packed up its possessions and moved to the north end of Mile End when I was not yet seven. As the horse-drawn wagon emerged from the CPR underpass on rue St. Laurent, my first impression was of the deeply spiked wood planks in the earth that served as sidewalks. The green fields, the nearby wooded area, and the profusion of wild flowers reinforced the feeling that this was really living in the country.

The day after our arrival I was told that the famous Shamrock Grounds was nearby on rue Jean Talon, only minutes away from where we lived. This was where the summer game of lacrosse was played. In almost religious tones I was informed that the game had been originated by the Mohawk Indians. The Shamrock team was the national champion, having defeated the New Westminster team from British Columbia. Of equal importance was the message of how I could gain entry into the grounds to watch the games on a regular basis. In unison my young friends proclaimed, “You must become a car watcher.”

To become a “car watcher” meant standing in the admission area and as ticket holders approached to call out “Mister, can I watch your car?” This was to protect the car against any sort of vandalism. The monetary reward was a nickel, or a dime, or fifteen cents. The amount was left to the generosity of the ticket holder. I concluded that the move to Buller Street was a great idea, for where else would I be able to watch a lacrosse game and also sit in a shiny car?

It was 1918 and the World War was still going, taking its terrible toll. The worldwide Spanish influenza epidemic took twenty million lives. Our grandfather, a Hebrew teacher (Melamud), who lived with us, succumbed. Both our parents were stricken and were quarantined away from home for many weeks.

I remember being reassured that by wearing a small cotton bag containing a piece of camphor I would be protected against the flu. My friends all walked around proudly with their little cotton bags hanging around their necks. In Peace Centennial public school, my sister Lily and my brother Bill were given instruction in the classroom to knit woollen scarves for the Canadian soldiers at the front.

Neither the war nor the influenza epidemic kept the Tombola<sup>14</sup> event from taking place. The parade brought the people in the region to gather on Main Street. The focus was on the statue of the Virgin Mary, draped in long ribbons of currency contributed generously by the local parishioners.

Our parents were not strangers to us. They were kind and loving. Father had a natural talent for storytelling. We were transported to a different time as he wove the tales of the old country and that world was brought closer into our lives.

Dasha and Solomon Kashtan were both born in the Ukraine, our mother in Priluki in the Chernigovsky oblast (province) and father in the Black Sea port city of Nikolaev. They followed the path taken by masses of immigrants from Eastern Europe which led them to Berlin, Germany, seeking to escape the oppressive conditions under Tsarism.

Mother settled in with her older brother Sasha, a musician, and father moved in with his brother Misha who had preceded him to Berlin. Dasha and Solomon met while working in a large cigarette factory in Berlin. Eventually they were married and remained in Berlin until funds were saved enabling them to continue their journey.

When the boat train from Quebec City arrived at the Bonaventure station in Montreal, father noticed signs announcing that there were jobs available with the CPR in Mile End. He accepted his first Canadian job working on the freight cars transporting limestone and sand, mined from the quarries which dotted the landscape in the region.

Within a short period of time, father found work in his trade when he was hired as an assistant foreman in one of the large cigarette and tobacco firms. Immediately following the end of the war there were signs of deterioration in working conditions. Although he was an assistant foreman, father gave his moral support to the workers and their wage demands. For giving his support, father was blacklisted in the industry.

For a long time after, father could not obtain a job. The period of tranquility in our lives ended and we began to experience poverty. As with so many who have experienced poverty, it is not something that is easily forgotten. Even as children, we began to recognize the inner strength which our parents showed and what they did to keep the burdens off their children as much as possible.

In desperation, money was borrowed from relatives (five sisters our parents had helped to bring to Canada) to open a small neighbourhood grocery store. This was a totally new experience for our parents. They rented an old framework structure facing Dante Street. It had no basement, central heating, or any kind of insulation. We moved into the rear of the store which had been partitioned, a single large

<sup>14</sup>Editor's note: I could find no definition of "tombola" which matches Kashtan's description. A tombola is a sort of lottery, which may well have been part of the festival he describes.

room divided in two. The great difficulty was operating with insufficient funds to stock the store shelves.

In the hot summer days when ice was needed to preserve food products, my ten-year-old brother, Bill, and I volunteered to go to the CPR freight yards where the huge blocks of ice were stored, still in the freight cars which transported them from the frozen Laurentian lakes. The freight handlers allowed us to climb into the freight cars to pick up the ice scraps. Fortunately, Bill was tall enough to give me a boost into the freight car and also help me down. A well-constructed cart would have helped, but we had a rickety old cart with wobbly wheels. It was touch and go whether we would make it back to the store before the ice melted. This was not one of our cherished moments.

We became aware of changed attitudes in the neighbourhood when we began to experience a few unpleasant incidents. These started one day when my group of friends was playing in the field and without warning three or four older Canadian boys, teenagers, threatened us, saying, "You can't play here, go away." There were older Jewish boys nearby who were there for us and ready to come to our aid.

One wintry day a student on his way to Peace Centennial public school was knocked unconscious, struck by a large frozen banana stalk. We witnessed him being carried into the school in the presence of the principal, Mr. Rowell. At the end of the day our classroom teacher announced that we should go home in groups and come to school in groups.

This harassment continued and an incident occurred which affected my sister, my brother, and myself. On an early evening the three of us were clearing the snow off a small ice-patch in a nearby field, making it available for skating. Without warning three older boys came yelling towards us, "You can't skate here, go away." They then started on Bill, who was not yet eleven. One of the boys lunged at him swinging his fists. Whereupon Bill struck back hard enough to knock the boy to the ground. When this happened, the attackers left. Bill had fractured a knuckle and sprained his arm, requiring a visit to the local doctor, Dr. Poulin.

Some weeks had passed when I brought home a school assignment to memorize lines from the *Song of Hiawatha*. When father heard me recite some of the lines from this epic, he used the occasion to speak to us about tradition and anti-Semitism and the controlling forces in society. He said we must be proud of who we are.

A day came when one of our wishes came true. We were at play on one of the fields when we were approached by a group of French Canadian boys with an invitation to join them in a game called "drapeau." The game called for two teams. A broomstick with a flag attached was placed in an upright position in a designated centre spot at one end of the field. The team occupying the smaller part of the field had the objective of grabbing the broomstick and running to the opposite end of the field without being touched by members of the opposing team. The symbol on the flag was a *fleur de lys*. We were third graders and only knew about the Union Jack.

We did not know it then, but this was a game about identity and country. Our knowledge of the meaning of flags was at best foggy.

A friendship with Mathew, a neighbour newly arrived from England, broadened my horizons. It was a time when some of our loyalty to the game of lacrosse switched to the game of cricket, a game we knew nothing about. Under Mathew's instruction, we made our own bats with pieces of fruit boxes and all the necessary accoutrements. Our shin pads were old newspapers. We made the wickets and then we played.

Mathew was generous and passed on old copies of his favourite boys' magazines: *Magnet*, *Gem*, *Popular*, and *Chum*. The stories depicted the life of boys in the English public school system. These were the private schools for the sons of the well-to-do. We learned about tuck shops and prefects. How vastly different it seemed from our public school system.

Mathew awakened my interest in reading beyond the school reader. In my early years, my reading took a leap forward from the *American Boy* series by Frank Merriwell, the Tom Swift series of books, and G.A. Henty's *Empire Reminiscences*. I had been given a copy of a 900-page book entitled *The Cry for Justice, an Anthology of Social Protest*, edited by Upton Sinclair, with an introduction by Jack London. The book consisted of selections from writers from 25 countries, philosophers, poets, and social reformers who voiced the struggle against social injustice.

The time arrived when our parents decided to close the grocery store and leave the annex. When they had first arrived in Canada, father had brought with him two clarinets which he had played in the Tsar's band. They were his sentimental treasures. Jokingly he would tell us that the clarinets would be our inheritance. Now he would have to sell them to pay the mover and to settle in our new location.

The move in 1920 to Cadieux Street and Prince Arthur brought our family into a more social milieu. We were situated between St. Louis Square and St. Lawrence Boulevard or, as it was called, the Main. St. Louis Square was noted as a meeting place for French Canadian nationalists; and nearby Prince Arthur Hall was the headquarters of the trade union locals of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, A.F. of L., and where left-wing mass meetings took place. The old red brick building on Cadieux was the Peretz *shule* (school), close to the corner of Prince Arthur Street.

The neighbourhood showed signs of wear and tear, with some of the dwellings displaying a slum quality. I was a nine-year-old, and wondered why young women in nearby houses stood at their front room windows, opening and drawing the curtains while men sauntered along the street. The main water lines were in a recurring state of disrepair and resulted in the constant digging up of roads and sidewalks. A loud, clanging bell warned the residents when the water supply was to be cut. Children playing on the street would rush to their homes shouting the news. Some of the residents showed little faith in the efficiency of the Works Department. They not only filled kettles, pots, and pans but also their bathtubs.

In due course, I was enrolled in the Peretz *shule*. The school had been named after I.L. Peretz, the founder of modern Yiddish literature. In a famous story called *The Weaver's Tale*, I.L. Peretz wrote:

Piece work, piece work, piece work and the owners get all the profit ... I take a look at husband and father ... you should see how he scrapes and bows before the boss and flunkys ... and trembles before he is rewarded with a favourable glance.... I will never allow myself to reach such a state.

I remember my mother spending time counting the piece-work tags which she earned working in the factory and which indicated the number of garments worked on during the week. Oft times on Fridays, her co-workers would come to the house to compare their weekly pay cheques. They found this necessary because many employers arbitrarily decreased formerly agreed-upon rates.

It was at the Peretz *shule* that I began to grasp in a deeper sense the meaning of the stories my father told us. He recognized that there was a pattern of values that were related to the struggles of people in society for better living conditions and human dignity. It was here that I learned the history of May Day and the great struggle for the eight-hour day in 1886 in the United States. It is noteworthy that in Quebec in 1886, Bishop Taschereau threatened excommunication to the members of the Knights of Labor who were supporters of the struggle for the eight-hour day.

My father found employment in the men's clothing industry and joined the union. He invited me to walk with him in the May Day parade with the workers of his local union. The parade started at Fletcher's Field, proceeding along Main Street to the Prince Arthur Hall.

Late one night when I was fast asleep, my father entered my bedroom and gently touched my shoulder to waken me. He asked me to come into the kitchen quietly so as not to disturb my mother. He showed me his awfully swollen arms. He needed help to put cold compresses on both arms. A meeting of union members of Local 209 had been attacked by gangsters in Prince Arthur Hall. The Yiddish press in Toronto reported the incident: "In Montreal a pogrom campaign against members of the Amalgamated Union is taking place. The Union-breakers resorted to the use of imported gangsters from Chicago and New York against progressive union activists."

On 4 November the pressers' Local 209 rejected the decision of the Joint Board to suspend eight active members because of their left-wing views. The New York Yiddish daily *Der Tog* (The Day) reported that "members of the local union voted against the expulsion. S. Kashtan together with three other pressers spoke out against the Joint Board decision in defense of the loyalty of the expelled members and of their contribution to the union. Their defeat would mean the suppression of free speech. Their speeches had a deep effect, winning the support of the workers."

An emergency meeting was called to take place in the progressive Finnish Workers Hall on St. Henri. This hall was also used by the Finnish branch of the

Workers Sports Association. Some of their members belonged to the union. This time the union members were well prepared. On the night of the meeting, Workers Sports members guarding the building were prepared to meet another gangster attack, but the gangsters failed to show up.

If this hostility seemed confusing at the time, it became clarified over the course of many struggles that the members of the Amalgamated fought against gangsters and the bosses who hired them. Montreal was the centre of the men's clothing industry with 374 factories — the predominantly French Canadian and Jewish workers who operated them faced conditions of severe exploitation.

Prior to my thirteenth birthday my formal education came to an end. I had hoped to enter high school in September but my parents were unable to provide financial support. The Protestant school board decided that no longer would high school education be free in Montreal. It introduced a monthly fee. This and other school costs, such as books, were a hindrance my parents could not overcome.

My life took a sharp turn. I was compelled to enter the labour market without any kind of vocational training. According to official statistics I would be designated a "child worker." In the *Labor Gazette* of 1931, more than a third of children between the ages of ten and fifteen were listed as being engaged in useful occupations; and 6.8 per cent of this age group in Canada worked between 50 and 60 hours a week for an average wage of \$4.00.

I enrolled in a night school hoping thereby to continue my formal education and to prepare the groundwork for becoming a skilled worker. But this could not take the place of vocational training, and I found myself hedged into dead-end jobs, the kind that could not lead to any advancement economically, socially, or culturally. These jobs brought in \$5 weekly for between 48 and 65 hours of work.

There was one job I thought had potential. I worked 48 hours weekly for a wholesale jeweler, one of the largest in Montreal. Outside my regular working hours, I worked overtime with no additional pay helping to take down storm windows at the owner's apartment building on Queen Mary Road.

One day J.L. — the staff called him J.L. — called me into his office to thank me for being an honest boy. I had found a Waltham watch in the rubbish and had returned it to stock. He said, "This company needs honest people working for us. One day you will become the general manager of the firm." This was a Horatio Alger story come to life. I must admit that when he took my hand in both of his hands to thank me, I thought my future was assured. A few months went by and finally I got up some nerve and asked J.L. for a raise of 50 cents a week. At the end of the month I received a slip: "Your services are no longer required."

This was by no means the worst of the dead-end jobs. I was puzzled by the conditions of life people had to face and I was searching for answers. My parents were not political people, i.e., they did not belong to any political party, but they did believe strongly in trade unions. Father was a person with a progressive outlook and

supported the left-wing in the working-class movement. He was well read and I don't recall a time when we could not communicate views and opinions.

My brother Bill had become a Young Communist League organizer in Toronto and southern Ontario. Before he left home, he informed me that the Young Pioneer Club in Montreal was building a young people's mandolin orchestra. Would I care to join? I had a mandolin and had taken lessons. This was a gift to me from my parents when I turned thirteen. The idea of becoming part of an orchestra appealed to me. Above all, it would give me the opportunity to be with boys and girls of my generation. The Young Pioneers was a communist-led organization.

Although the concept of workers' children's organizations was new in Montreal, the idea of workers' Sunday schools, children's theatre and music groups goes far back in history, as far back in England as the famous Chartist movement of the mid-19th century.

Our club consisted of a bunch of high-spirited boys and girls, mostly high school students with a sprinkling of working youth. We met on Sunday mornings. We came together at numerous outdoor activities, skating in the winter and paper chases on Mount Royal in the fall. For the first time I experienced discussion and debate of current events. As for our mandolin orchestra, it became a successful venture consisting of twenty mandolin players. Our conductor was a professional musician and worked hard to get us to tremolo in unison.

Before long we played on the stage of Prince Arthur Hall opening up mass meetings with the playing of the *Internationale*. When this revered song was played, the audience would stand. I found it interesting that both the *Internationale* and the *Marseillaise* had their birthplace in France.

The traditional old labour songs of the IWW were sung at every opportunity: *The Rebel Girl*, *Solidarity Forever*, *Long-Haired Preachers*, *Johnny Get Your Gun* and many others from England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany — and of course we sang *Alouette*.

We also recited poetry at our meetings. "The Cry of Children" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and "The Men of England" by Percy Bysshe Shelley fed our social consciousness: "The seed ye sow another reaps / The wealth ye find another keeps / The robes ye weave another wears."

#### *The Ten Commandments*

The heading of this section may give one the impression of an ethical drama which takes us back thousands of years. The brief story that follows, however, is something I experienced in 1928.

Lord Baden Powell of Gilwell, the Chief Scout of the British Boy Scout movement, announced that an international Boy Scout Jamboree would take place in Liverpool in 1929 and the youth of the Empire was called upon to participate.

From their inception, the youth organizations I belonged to, the Young Pioneers and the YCL, had campaigned against cadet training in the high schools. We



reacted against the Jamboree. We responded by distributing a circular debunking Baden Powell. While distributing this circular, I was arrested by two members of the anti-red squad, a branch of the City Police Department.

The circular did not attempt to undermine the positive values of general scouting. In Canada we knew of the naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton and his *wondercraft* principles. Although the Boy Scouts were seen to be a significant social movement, the true motive behind Baden Powell's leadership was veiled. There was more to his leadership than simply learning to tie knots, lighting a fire without a match and avoiding getting lost in the woods. He thought it was a good idea for the British Scout movement to cooperate with Hitler's *Jugend*. This was preached at a time when the violent, aggressive spirit of fascism was already a threat to peace.

My case came to trial in the Montreal Recorder's Court with Judge Thouin presiding. I was sixteen, this was my first arrest and court appearance, and I was without experienced counsel.

After reading the circular, Judge Thouin looked up and put the following question to me: "Do you believe in the Ten Commandments?" I was perplexed. I had been told that my arrest was simply due to a by-law infraction, but now I faced a judgement of my personal conscience. If there was any morality to consider, I thought it was militarism that led to killing. I hesitated, and the judge called out sternly, "Name them!"

Well, the law was the law. I started with the fifth commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife —"

"Enough," declared the judge. "Thirty days in jail or pay the fine and court costs." As I left the courtroom, I wondered whether the stern reaction of the judge had something to do with my recitation of the five commandments which related to man and his fellow man. My costs were paid by a representative from the Canadian Labour Defense League, an organization which played an important role in the defense of democratic rights.

My association with the Young Pioneers brought me into contact with the Jewish fraternal organization, Der Kanader Arbeitering, which was planning to open a workers' children's camp in the Laurentians. Camp Naye Velt (New World) was to be opened in the summer of 1928 at Fourteen Island Lake, close to the newly completed workers' Camp Nitgedaiget (Don't Worry).

The staff consisted of volunteer workers. M. Feldman, a talented Yiddish teacher, and I were invited to be the co-directors. When the time arrived to board the train waiting at the Park Extension Station, there were 50 boys and girls, 8 staff members, and 2 co-directors.



When the month of August rolled around, the 23rd day was remembered as an important date. It was the first anniversary of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti.<sup>15</sup> On this occasion we celebrated the lives of both martyrs in song, poetry, and drama.

Three hundred people — parents, relatives, and friends — were present at the closing. The memories that were shared by all at this camp lived on. For the organization that made it possible, it was a triumph. Close to 200 children benefited from Camp Naye Velt in the years of its operation.

On my return to the city, a personal wish was fulfilled. I obtained a job as a steamfitter helper with a plumbing and steamfitting union shop. I was encouraged by the master steamfitter when he said, “Ask any questions you want, we’ll get along fine.”

To become a skilled worker in the trade required a combination of theory and practice. There were many helpers who had worked in the trade for three years or more but had not obtained official recognition, termed ‘improver status’. This affected their wages, and their progress in becoming steamfitters was impeded.

In the hopes of rectifying this situation the Montreal Plumbers and Steamfitters Helpers Association was formed. More than 130 applications were signed within a short period of time. Without the cooperation or support of the Steamfitters union, the Labour Department, or the employers, however, we were at a great disadvantage.

Significant changes were taking place in the construction industry in the city. The new buildings were bigger, higher, and deeper. Workers were now more exposed to accidents, and the list of these kept growing.

There was a public awakening to the new dangers when, at the site of the huge Sun Life building on Windsor Street, three workers working at a high point of the building were dropped to the ground and instantly killed. This placed the need for more protection on the job and improved labour legislation on the agenda, but much remained to be done, as I found out.

Steamfitters and their helpers worked with heavy cast-iron parts. One day, the master and I were working on a job in one of the first multi-level underground garages in the city, on St. Catherine Street West next door to the Forum. On that day, we were to start installing the new heavy heating equipment on the lower level. Since fans were not yet installed, automobiles were to be kept out to prevent pollution from carbon monoxide fumes while we were at work. But, because there was no supervision and government inspection at this new job, cars kept going down to the lower level.

<sup>15</sup>On 23 August 1927, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who lived in Boston, Massachusetts, were executed in the electric chair for a murder they did not commit. Their trial aroused the protests of millions of people worldwide who believed in their innocence. In 1977 the Governor of Massachusetts officially rehabilitated the memory of Sacco and Vanzetti. US authorities admitted that their sentence had been unjust.

I was asphyxiated and when I regained consciousness I found myself lying on the sidewalk on St. Catherine Street surrounded by people. I did not remember how I had got there or who had carried me outside. No ambulance was called and the master steamfitter was nowhere to be found. I finally managed to stand up and got on a streetcar heading towards home.

That evening, my parents took me to the family doctor. I was told that my health was badly affected and that I was too young to be doing this heavy work in an unprotected environment. This turn of events was a source of deep disappointment. I was compelled to leave this occupation.

### *Choices*

A few months prior to the great economic crash in 1929, I accepted a position as an organizer for the Young Communist League in Montreal. On that occasion, I received a letter from the national YCL office in Toronto. It asserted that my generation was destined to witness the kind of social and political changes in society that no previous generation had experienced. Thus it presumed to speak in the Marxist spirit.

The YCL was a small organization established only five years earlier. It served as an educational organization for young workers and students, educating young people 'in the spirit of socialism'. Its purpose was to organize young workers and students to achieve better working conditions and enhance their quality of life. Its constitution declared it to be an independent youth organization without party affiliations, but nevertheless it supported Communist party ideology. The YCL program put forward an anti-militarist stance. We believed that socialism offered the only remedy for unemployment and poverty.

For a young Canadian to become an organizer for the Young Communist League was sufficiently rare for it to be regarded as an occupational hazard. There were many of my generation in the twenties and thirties with an unspoken hope that they could escape the bad economic conditions which prevailed, but only a tiny number were attracted to the socialist ideal. But many viewpoints were changed at the height of the Depression.

It had not occurred to me the extent my decision would affect the course of my life. The process of becoming a radical activist flowed naturally from the experiences I encountered.

When I look back, I realize that the stories of the Great War, 1914-1918, had a profound influence on my outlook. Canadians remembered the Canadian Expeditionary Force of 475,000, the 230,000 casualties, and the death of 60,000 young people. Radicalism would grow from the legacy of those years.

I was often asked whether this was an auspicious time for me to become an organizer. I was young, only seventeen. It was also a time when the Party was involved in a bitter debate on programmatic questions. Being a political novice would indeed make it more difficult to carry on. Although I was not a Party member, I was

invited to attend the debates. I was bewildered by the range of political and theoretical differences and the bitterness expressed in polemic.

I was encouraged to read and study. The people I came to know were working people of different national and cultural backgrounds. I was introduced to a world of books and the richness of different cultures. These newly formed relationships were intellectually stimulating. When one of the speakers quoted "for each age is a dream that is dying or coming into birth and in their interaction lies the secret of historical change," I began to more fully grasp the significance of the dream which we had.

My reading of *The Outline of History* by H.G. Wells, and works by George Bernard Shaw, Charles Dickens and many other writers, solved for me some of the mystery of the world. It helped me appreciate the work of Michelangelo, Rembrandt, the music of Beethoven and how beautiful life could be.

My political thinking was influenced by Professor Scott Nearing's *Dollar Diplomacy*, *The Iron Heel* by Jack London (a prophetic book about fascism), and one of the great exposés of World War I, *Under Fire* by Henri Barbusse. I concluded that there was much that was wrong with the capitalist system.

Among the topics addressed in the debates, a major one was the impending world crisis. That prophecy came to pass. No other political entity in the country recognized this reality. The changes stirred by the collapse on Wall Street had worldwide repercussions. Mass unemployment swept the country.

Something my generation had never experienced was total destitution in the midst of plenty. By 1930, there were tens of thousands of young people riding the rods from one city to another searching for work. They came to Montreal seeking jobs and many were charged with vagrancy. Many were ill-treated and arrested. Unable to pay rents and maintain mortgages, families were cast from their homes. The homeless gathered in empty lots in ramshackle, makeshift conditions.

The Marxist concept was that the rapid expansion of production and the extreme limitation of consumption, combined with the seriously falling rate of profit in the capitalist production system, were central to the problem. For the first time, many people who believed in the capitalist system began to question its fundamentals and saw the need for change.

Slow to start, in 1930 unemployed organizations began to take shape in Montreal, fighting against evictions, for increased welfare, against means tests, and opposing the monopolistic Montreal Light Heat and Power Corporation cutting off electricity. Many families were living in darkness until the unemployment movement took shape.

The politicians talked about everything, including means tests, but not how to provide people with the things that were needed to live and to prevent children from starving. They expressed the fear that relief for the unemployed would diminish their dignity.

6 March 1930 opened a new chapter in the fight against unemployment in Canada. An appeal was issued by the left-wing internationally for global demonstrations against unemployment to take place on that day. Millions of copies of the appeal were circulated worldwide. It called upon government to act for “Jobs, Work and Wages” and a program of relief.

The daily newspapers railed against the call. “This is world revolution,” they wrote. The authorities threatened mass arrests. Warnings were issued: “DO NOT TAKE PART.” The weeks leading up to the day of the demonstration were filled with tension.

On the evening of 5 March, a meeting was held in the office of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers on St. Catherine Street West to make the last minute preparations. Between 40 and 50 representatives of unemployed organizations were present. The first point of business was to discuss the petition which would be presented to the Montreal City Council. The second was to choose a venue for the demonstration.

The only hall that was available for 6 March was the Labour Hall of the Montreal Trades Council. Owners of public halls throughout the city had been warned by the police to deny use of their halls for gatherings of the unemployed or their licences would be cancelled.

The question was asked, “What shall we do if the police prevent entry to the Labour Hall?” as had been implied in the press. It was agreed that if the entry was blocked we would quietly inform the people to march to the City Hall, where a petition would be presented. When volunteers were asked to speak at the demonstration in front of City Hall, there was no immediate response. My name was proposed and I accepted.

Conditions being what they were, five courageous young women volunteered to protect the speaker in the event of rough police treatment. The five young women were all members of the Industrial Needle Trades Union.

On the morning of 6 March 1930, we were confronted with an incredible sight on St. Catherine Street and Main Street and adjoining areas. There were thousands of people milling about. The unemployed had rallied from many parts of the city. It was reported that 20,000 people had turned out.

There were also an extraordinary number of police, on motorcycles and on foot, confronting the demonstrators. They sought to disperse the unemployed. The way to the Labour Hall was blocked. The word was passed along: “March to the City Hall.”

I arrived at the City Hall with my five defenders. I strode up to the front entrance and stood up on the balustrade. It was a striking sight to see the flow of people pouring in from Main Street with bystanders on the street joining the parade. They filled the side streets: St. Jean Baptiste, rue St. Gabriel, rue St. Vincent, Place Jacques Cartier, Place Vauquelin, and the Bonsecours market area. And they were packed in right to the City Hall steps. Neither horses nor vehicles could get through.

I had time to read the petition and its demands, in both languages, calling for: immediate relief and a work and wages program, a halt to evictions and cutting electricity in homes, assistance to the single unemployed, free milk for schoolchildren in public schools, free school books and health care, and for the Montreal City Council to support the demand for an Unemployment Insurance Program.

Suddenly the City Hall doors opened and I was grabbed from behind by the police. I was held by my neck and clubbed. They tried to pull me into the building. The five defenders also held tight, shouting to the police, "Leave my son alone!" (four of them were my age and the oldest was in her early thirties). Finally, my defenders released me when I was able to call out, "Let me go or they will fracture my neck!"

Following the dispersal, the unemployed at two of the soup kitchens (one near Place Viger and another in the West End of Montreal) continued their protest.

A few arrests were made. I was placed under arrest, charged and convicted, as were a few others who spoke up outside the Place Viger soup kitchen. It was a moment in time when illusions about free speech and freedom of assembly were dissipated.

In Quebec, the government succeeded even more than in any of the other provinces in placing the burden of the crisis on the backs of the people. Living standards and relief were among the lowest in the country and there were 250,000 on relief in Montreal alone.

The government introduced a "back to the land movement" to get the unemployed out of the city. It did not take long for stories to appear in the newspapers about the "neo-colonists" and their awful experiences of destitution. Their demands grew to return to the city.

The well-known writer Gabrielle Roy came to Montreal to address a meeting about her visit to the Gaspé Peninsula. She said the situation faced by the fishermen had reduced them to great poverty. Almost immediately after her speech, Premier Taschereau declared that she had insulted the inhabitants of the Gaspé. During the thirties, the authorities deemed it necessary to refer to any social action, statement, or demonstration to achieve better living conditions as an insult to the French Canadian people, despite the fact that it was French Canadian workers and unemployed who were involved.

The Depression eventually led to new political alignments. We witnessed a home-grown branch of fascist ideology which was called corporatism in Quebec: a mixture of fascism and clericalism. The leading nationalist historian, Abbé Lionel Groulx; the leading nationalist daily newspaper, *Le Devoir*; the leading nationalist monthly magazine, *L'Action Nationale*; and the leading nationalist youth organization, *Jeune-Canada*, were among those who backed the right-wing nationalist movement in the early thirties.

Only 9 per cent of the workforce in Quebec was unionized. Corporatism encouraged company unionism and opposed legitimate trade unionism and the right to strike. We witnessed rabid campaigns of anti-Semitism and racism. Moreover,

Mussolini's aggressive war actions in the mid-thirties against Ethiopia were not seen as an insult to the French Canadian people of Quebec, certainly not by the corporatists.

### *Expectations*

On the occasion of the sixteenth anniversary of International Youth Day, I was asked to participate in an International Youth Camp combined with a six-month YCL school in Moscow.<sup>16</sup> I was enthusiastic about the prospect of taking this journey. It was an opportunity to study Marxism and to visit the land that gave birth to the first successful socialist revolution.

The great October revolution took place in 1917 and was hailed as a revolution for human liberation. The first book I read about the revolution was Rhys Williams's *The Agonies and Triumphs of the Russian Revolution*. Now it was thirteen years later, what did I expect to see?

Prior to my departure, the *Montreal Star* had published a popular series of articles written by an American journalist, H.R. Knickerbocker, on the first Five Year Plan, 1928 to 1933. It was the first time that Montrealers in great numbers had had the opportunity to read about this startling development. The Soviet government had launched a massive electrification program throughout the land. Power stations were being erected in Western Siberia. New industrial centres were being built in the regions of Kuznetsk and in the Urals with their huge iron and steel centres. The huge Dnieper dam was close to completion and hundreds of new factories were being built. Massive tractor plants took shape and the vast industrial complex of Magnitogorsk came into existence. It was said that not since the construction of the Panama Canal had such prodigious undertakings been attempted. The success or failure of the first Five Year Plan was being judged by millions of people throughout the world who saw hope in the endeavours of the first builders of a socialist society. It was an historic test. Ilya Ehrenburg tells the story of the life led by the people under the first Five Year Plan: "There was ignorance, poverty, mechanical leftist ideas, chaotic conditions, food shortages and dearth of consumer goods. The people made tremendous sacrifices in those years of all immediate benefits in order to achieve their goals."

It was early in May 1930 when my parents accompanied me to the Montreal Harbour, wishing me "bon voyage," with mixed feelings. As I embarked on the White Star Line SS *Baltic* I was conscious that I was leaving the dreary scene of capitalism of the thirties with its mass unemployment and the disenchanting youth searching for work. When the train I was on crossed the border into the Soviet Un-

<sup>16</sup>International Youth Day was first celebrated in 1915, during World War I. It was organized by the Socialist movement in Germany and was influenced by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, two renowned revolutionary leaders in Germany who were conscious of the important role young socialists could play in the struggle against militarism and war.

ion and I saw the banner stretched across the entry point, “Workers of the World Unite,” I felt that I had entered a country that shared my hopes.

The scene at the main railway station in Moscow was a kaleidoscope of life. The station was bursting with people coming and going. There were peasants pouring in from the agricultural districts. Among them were hundreds of tourists pushing their way to wherever they were going. Once outside the station, my attention focused on the street transportation. I had previously seen two streetcars joined together at home, now I saw three joined together, jammed with people, rushing through the narrow thoroughfares.

Close by were peasants sitting on the sidewalks, leaning against the walls of buildings, offering services of one kind or another. In particular, I remember two of the peasants with hammers in their hands, offering to repair shoes, boots, and whatever else was presented for repair. They had the hammers, but no metal nails. Instead, soles and heels were repaired with wood pegs. Watching them at work brought some of the realities into focus.

I was fascinated by the Russian architecture of past decades. But then one noticed the bullet marks on some of the buildings made during the civil war.

My destination was Pushkino, a distance of some 30 or 40 miles from Moscow. And from there it would be a short distance to the school camp. I hadn't expected to board an electric train and to experience this modern means of efficient transportation.

Pushkino was a beautiful wooded area with a stream running through it. There were a number of large country-style wood structures in good condition which were to be home for the students for the next six months. After settling in, we found that we would be obliged to do our studies by kerosene lamplight. The electrification plan had not yet reached the Pushkino countryside. We were informed, however, that we would have electricity in four months, and we did. When the lights went on there was a great celebration.

We were not living in isolation. In quick order, the groups of YCLers from different countries were introduced to each other.

The study program included five main subjects: political economy, the international working-class movement, Marxist philosophy, the history of the Russian revolution, and youth and militarism.

The school schedule allowed for one free day weekly, which made trips to Moscow possible. The change of scenery was a welcome relief from the grind of the study of political economy. We each had our *propusk* card (i.e., our I.D.), which was essential if we intended to wander around the city, enter buildings, and various institutional establishments. Uniformed security people were at most entrances — a discipline carried over from the very difficult times. On our first visit to the Tretyakoff Art gallery an unexpected opportunity presented itself when we joined a class of Russian high school students studying English who were in the midst of a discussion with their teacher. They were offering opinions on paintings depicting



scenes from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The students were asked to express their views on the subject and to relate their opinions to the ideas the artists sought to express. We were captivated by this experience.

We proceeded to visit GOOM near Red Square. GOOM consisted of a countless number of boutique-style stores. Built in the previous century, it was architecturally fascinating. It was now the third year of the first Five Year Plan and there was some improvement in the availability of consumer goods, clothing, and also food products, but shortages were still considerable. This resulted in queues being formed no matter where one shopped. Items including leather goods, suitcases, tools, and notions were not easily available.

Our visit to GOOM that day was cut short due to a bizarre circumstance, the kind that added fuel to everyday difficulties: an extreme shortage of coin. Currency was being refused because no change was available. Storekeepers had no coin, nor did operators of public transportation. Shopping was paralyzed on a city-wide scale. On returning to the school, we were informed that there had been a calculated plan by unknown people to remove all coin from the marketplace. A few days after our GOOM expedition, the miscreants were caught and shortly thereafter normalcy returned.

The changes in the city were indicated by the number of cranes and power shovels at work. Work was about to begin on the building of the Moscow subway. The economic planners were talking of a "fifteen year perspective plan," of three Five Year Plans. When the Russian trade agency, Amtorg, in New York put an advertisement in the *New York Times* announcing 6,000 jobs, they received more than 100,000 applications.

Halfway through the course, an announcement was made that the students would be given the opportunity to be attached for a short time to a few of the large plants and factories in Moscow. I was given the opportunity to spend my week in the Electrazavod plant, a plant of some 6,000 workers. Electrazavod was an important adjunct to the great electrification program, producing transformers and electric motors.

I was not involved in production of any kind, but there was ample opportunity to study the working conditions. I saw the workers in a few of the departments working with new equipment. Many of them had received their training when the first Five Year Plan commenced in 1928. The workers I met evinced a good spirit. I was captivated by the answers I received to questions about the union's role in the plant, standards of wages, cultural programs, and the children's nursery. The plant was a microcosm of what the system was striving to achieve.

When lunch hour came, I was directed to a large auditorium set with more than a hundred tables. Each table was covered with a tablecloth, with a small vase in the centre containing two live flowers. There were hundreds of workers having their lunch. I shared their food during the week I was there. The meals were far superior to any of the meals I had since my arrival. The workers paid a few kopeks for each



meal. This was not a special show for the benefit of “foreigners.” All of this was looked after by the trade union in the plant and was a daily occurrence on working days.

In April 1930, one of the Soviet Union’s beloved poets, Vladimir Mayakovsky, died. When I first entered the club house, I noticed a large size “wall paper” (a wall-mounted newspaper) consisting of cartoons, short articles of interest, sports statistics, and many other items of interest. I noticed the story about the death of Mayakovsky. With it appeared a poem which he had written in 1926. I obtained an English translation. This was the poem: “Whenever earth is lit, / The slogan for all should be the same, / Speak to the fascist with bayonet wit, / With words of bullets and tongues of flame.” When he wrote this poem, Mayakovsky saw the first signs of the “Brown Plague” (which he called fascism) breaking out on the continent and threatening the world.

By 1932, the menace of Hitler coming to power and the threat of another world war was real. In this situation, the drive to industrialize the country became the main objective, to protect its security.

In mid-August, I had the opportunity to visit a collective farm community, a few hours’ drive outside of Moscow. I was impressed by the well-kept, white-painted structures. I was invited by Komsomol (YCL) members to talk about the economic crisis in Canada. There were close to a hundred farmers present. I spoke about the mass unemployment and made reference to the fact that the big department stores in Montreal were filled with a great variety of consumer goods, but the people did not have money to purchase these products, clothing, and food.

I spoke for less than half an hour. As I was concluding, three women walked up to the platform where I was standing and the three of them spat in front of me. It was a most unpleasant moment.

“None of what you said is true,” they declared loudly. “You are telling lies. Canada is the land of plenty.” To say I was surprised is to put it mildly. The rest of the audience sat quietly.

At that moment I was in a no-win situation. I concluded that the women were against the collectivization policy of the government. It was not within my mandate to convince them to support collectivization, but I was determined to defend the information I had set forth in my speech. I asked my translator what this was all about. He related that two years earlier, a barn was burned down and the local party secretary was killed. The countryside was not at peace with government policy in this area.

15 September was the sixteenth anniversary of International Youth Day. All the students at the camp were invited, individually or in groups, to participate in the celebrations. I was chosen to go to Constantinovka, about 1,100 kilometres from Moscow. It was a heavy industry centre. I was slated to address a YCL rally at the Voroshilov steel plant, a plant that employed many thousands of workers. (It had been a year since I had addressed a meeting at the Prince Arthur Hall in Montreal,

on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary, with the full complement of the police “red squad” present.)

I was met at the station at Constantinovka the next morning by Komsomol leaders from the region and the Komsomol committee from the plant. The huge factory auditorium was packed. The applause was tremendous when it was announced that a Canadian Young Communist would address the meeting regarding the struggle against militarism and war.

In my opening remarks I mentioned that it was the famous writer, H.G. Wells, who said that World War I was “the war to end all wars” and that the “war of 1914 was a holy war.” Two years after having said so, he confessed his errors.

Departing the next day, I was accompanied by an enthusiastic bunch of Komsomol members. I’ve never forgotten their friendship and their determination to build their socialist environment in the face of immense difficulties. Their parting gift to me was food to eat on the train going back to Moscow. It consisted of cucumbers. Riches did not abound.

Eventually, the school camp came to an end. Many friendships had been established. Some of my “good friends” I could take home with me — the books we had studied together.

I traveled to Liverpool, then embarked for Boston aboard the SS *Mergantic*. Arriving on a cold, wintry day, I felt close to home. When I finally entered the home of my parents in Montreal I was cheerfully happy.

#### *A Notorious Year*

When New Year 1931 was chimed in, not all eyes were open to the Rights of Man.

On Monday, 19 January 1931, the Montreal Council of Unemployed held a meeting in the Labour Temple on 1201 St. Dominique Street. Near the conclusion of the meeting, while the Chairman was making some remarks about scheduling another one, the hall was invaded by more than 150 police, led by members of the “Red Squad.” The five speakers were arrested and held in the trial ward of Bordeaux Jail.

The Chief of Police, Director Langevin, who was interviewed following this raid, stated: “Some time ago I had been asked to give a permit to hold a meeting. This is about the hundredth time I have refused!” One of his men, Inspector Bilodeau, added “If any such demonstrations occur again, the police would be obliged to treat the crowd more severely.”<sup>17</sup>

The *Montreal Star* reported the demands presented to the meeting for consideration and discussion: “immediate grant of cash relief to secure three square meals a day; no eviction of unemployed from their homes; free light; free transportation and books for children of the unemployed; abolition of the vagrancy laws.” The

<sup>17</sup>*Montreal Gazette*, 20 January 1931.

*Star* further reported that the crowd obeyed the police and left the hall in an orderly fashion.<sup>18</sup>

In a letter to the *Gazette* on 3 February, F.R. Scott wrote:

The recent activities of the Montreal police in breaking up by force meetings of the unemployed in this City should not I feel, be allowed to pass without comment ... It is necessary first to clear the issue from the confusion likely to be introduced by the word 'communism'; whether or not these meetings were attended by communists or merely by unemployed laborers makes not a particle of difference, for communism is no more criminal than liberalism or socialism. If the police were to break up a meeting of CPR shareholders gathered to discuss a petition to Parliament, it would be equally objectionable.

Scott added "Assistant Professor of Constitutional and Federal Law" to his signature of the letter and, as this identified him as a teacher at McGill, both the Chief of Police and editor of the *Gazette* soon criticized his views. Scott received a request from the Principal of McGill not to use his title when writing to the newspapers.

Two days after the Council of Unemployed meeting was broken up, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Montreal had this to say in a pastoral letter. He admonished his flock against Communism: "If the first Five Year Plan succeeds we can expect other Canadian industries to suffer disastrous disorganization.... Christian charity is remedy for the ills today.... Charity reestablishes the equilibrium between rich and poor."

The five speakers at the meeting held in the Labour Temple were David Chalmers, Philippe Richer, Tom Miller, Fred Rose, and myself. We were charged with uttering seditious words. The case was a complete and vulgar frame-up. The police were ready to smash the meeting, so in order to justify this attack on free speech and freedom of assembly something had to be hung on the speakers.

The words we were charged with uttering were such that we would be the first to repudiate them. They only expressed the ignorant and distorted views of the Red Squad. The views ascribed to us were absolutely in no way similar to anything that we said and were contrary to our political beliefs. Regrettably, none of us thought in advance to have a copy of our speeches prepared or to have our own stenographers present to record them.

The police version of events is contained in a memorandum by Chief of Police Langevin entitled, "On the Young Communist League, 62 Rachel East":

I have the honour to report conforming with the instructions received by Inspector Bilodeau as follows: In this case in company of constable #46 Boyzum with several other men of the Department which names I will name later, we attended the communist meeting at 1201 St. Dominique, where several communist agitators by the names of Philippe Richer, Dave Kashtan, Thomas Miller, Fred Rose. These speakers were asking the people in the hall, which were about four hundred, to do the same thing as they did last year: to demonstrate in

<sup>18</sup>*Montreal Star*, 20 January 1931.

front of the City Hall<sup>19</sup> and show the aldermen and councilmen that they mean business. That will be the only way they get anything; also, if the police stop them or beat them, for them to do the same thing and show them that they are not afraid of them. That's the only way we will be able to gain anything so we won't be forced to eat that dirty, rotten soup at the Dufferin Refuge; also said when we go to the Salvation Army or priests they make us pray ... comrades, it shows you that priests are only tools of the capitalist class. They also stated if the police stop their demonstrations now, they will keep on until they will succeed even if they beat us or kill us. We will show them that the Soviet Union is much stronger than they think. Everything that is built was built by us and we must take it back by force as that is the only way we can get it. We cannot get anything by talking, the only thing we can get is by force. They are only a bunch of robbers. It is up to us to get it and the only way to get it is by using force. Now, comrades, we have waited long enough, and now is the time to strike, even if we have to leave our heads in front of City Hall. Four speakers spoke in English and one in French. The following constables attended the meeting 1164 Caron, 490 Marion, 696 Rainville, 275 Touchette, 1100 Gagnon, 364 Laroche, 419 Blanchette, 388 Hamel, 969 Lefevre, 10 Paquette, with their signatures, plus 46 Boyzcum and Detective Greenberg.

The last two were well-known members of the Red Squad.

Constable Marion testified at our trial:

Q: "Did they say anything about work?"

A: "They did not say anything about that. It was snowing at the time."

Q: "Were there any signs?"

A: "There was one sign we produced in the other case."

Q: "Do you remember what was on the sign?"

A: "I think it was something about establishing a proletariat in this country. I do not remember exactly."

Q: "Was any collection made?"

A: "No, they made no collection. They were all poor people."

As Frank Scott noted in the *Canadian Bar Review* of December 1931, "The net result of Montreal's enforcement of the law of sedition is that men and women are arrested, tried and sentenced on the evidence of semi-literate police constables who take longhand, isolated remarks from speeches delivered in a language with which they are very imperfectly familiar."

On 7 July 1930, Judge Wilson handed down his sentence: "The sentence I am going to give you now should serve as a warning to others. One year hard labour in Bordeaux Jail."

Eventually, our appeal was heard by the Federal Court of Appeal. Here is a sample of the transcript after the Crown Prosecutor, Mr. Gilmour, presented the police testimony that we had urged the crowd to "fight the police" and "leave heads in front of City Hall":

<sup>19</sup>The demonstration of 6 March 1930.

Mr. Justice Hall: "Whose heads are they to leave at the City Hall, their own or the policemen's heads?"

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "Apparently their own, but they were not explicit, anyway some heads were to be left at the City Hall steps."

Mr. Justice Guerin: "I would like to know a little more about what is sedition?"

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "The *Criminal Code* says sedition is an expression of seditious intent."

Mr. Justice Guerin: "Red is Red."

Mr. Justice Hall: "How wonderfully illuminating that phrase is. The first attempt is that it should be an unlawful assembly. Is that not a necessity?"

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "No sir, it was not an unlawful assembly, it was a perfectly orderly meeting."

Mr. Justice Hall: "Then where were the seditious words? I remember when I was a member of the Junior Bar Association, we had a meeting and protested against the selfishness of the Senior Bar in not giving the Junior Bar a proper representation on the government of the Bar and we said that we should organize and fight. Was that a seditious utterance?"

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "No sir, it all depends how you are going to fight."

Mr. Justice Rivard: "You were not going to leave your heads anywhere?"

Mr. Justice Hall: "I suppose you in your younger days have been advised frequently to go in and fight."

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "Yes sir, I am fighting before the Court now."

Mr. Justice Guerin: "But you are not within striking distance."

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "Don't mind the police, that is sedition."

Mr. Justice Hall: "I have known a good many students at college who did not mind the police."

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "I know of one who didn't and found himself in jail."

Mr. Justice Hall: "I think the police could find something else to do than to take notice of a lot of empty-headed fellows."

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "I am absolutely in accord with you, but it was not my business. If the police make cases, I have to prosecute them and I did and the jury returned a verdict. I am heartily in accord with you that such action on the part of the police is unnecessary. I don't think anything comes of letting young men blow off steam, but we are not faced with that now. The question is whether the verdict is good and the sentence adequate."

Mr. Garber (defence lawyer at the appeal): "You don't insist on more sentence."

Mr. Gilmour (Crown Prosecutor): "I do not."

Mr. Justice Hall: "It might be seditious to sing the *Marseillaise*."

Mr. Justice Rivard: "Or perhaps *God Save the King* somewhere?"

On 27 February 1932, our appeal was dismissed and the following morning we were sent to Bordeaux Jail to serve our sentence. The right to be treated as political prisoners was requested on three occasions and was denied.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup>The trial of Leslie Morris followed in March 1932. He and Phillip Halpern were arrested, charged with sedition while speaking at a meeting celebrating the Russian Revolution. Towards the end of the assembly, Morris called upon the audience to raise their hands in favour of a resolution relating to a civil rights issue in Canada. The evidence against him by Red

In 1931, meetings of the Montreal Trades and Labour Council, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, and the Canadian Legion National Convention all passed motions in favour of better support for the unemployed and a system of nationwide unemployment insurance. As the report adopted by the Legion convention put it: "No decent thinking person today can look with equanimity on the tragic absurdity of the economic system that permits a large proportion of our people to periodically lack the necessities of life, surrounded by a storehouse of food and goods accumulated by their labour, nor can the condition be satisfactorily accepted which enforces periods of unwilling idleness when at every hand there are useful needs to be undertaken."<sup>21</sup>

### *Workers Sports*

The Workers Sports movement first took root in Europe at the turn of the century with the support of mass social democratic parties, trade unions, and communist organizations.

In Canada, the pioneer workers sports organization was the Finnish Canadian Amateur Sports Federation. First organized in 1906, its vision was to create a federation to include all people, regardless of race and ethnic background. It sought to raise the cultural level of workers by promoting an interest in sports activity and to further the cause of the labour movement. Its internationalism was rooted in a belief in human brotherhood. The FCASF recorded remarkable achievements in track and field and long-distance skiing, establishing many records.

In 1928, the national formation of the Workers Sports Association of Canada took place, bringing into its ranks the independent WSA clubs and the affiliation on an autonomous level of the Finnish Workers Sport Clubs, Ukrainian, Jewish, and other ethnic sports clubs. The vision of the FCASF influenced all the affiliates of the WSAC. The WSAC encouraged the trade unions to sponsor their own sports teams, believing the playing field, gym, and rink should become areas to oppose the latent anti-trade unionism which company-dominated sports leagues fostered.

WSA members campaigned for increased federal, provincial, and municipal government support to expand community recreational programs. We spoke out against the taboo that denied members in sports organizations the right to react to social and labour issues. For example, in the same year as the WSAC's formation, the Amateur Athletic Union [AAU] excluded all but naturalized citizens from participating in its gymnastic events. Strongly opposed to this policy, the Toronto Jewish WSA branch demonstrated publicly at a competition being held at the Canadian Na-

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Squad witnesses was that he said: "All those in favour of the Revolution." He was charged with sedition and received the same sentence we did. Phillip Halpern died before he was sentenced.

<sup>21</sup>*Labour Gazette*, 1931, 1001.

tional Exhibition under AAU auspices. This was favourably received by the wider community.

My membership in the Montreal Central WSA club in the St. Louis Ward began in 1928 when I joined the newly opened club centre on Main Street and Maryann. The majority of the members were young needle trades union members. The combination of sports and interest in international current affairs enhanced the quality of the club's program. A high point was reached when the Montreal May Day Committee invited the newly formed Modern Dance group, which used the club premises, and the WSA calisthenics group to perform at the May Day rally in Prince Arthur Hall.

The integration of the WSA soccer team in the City soccer league was greeted with enthusiasm by soccer fans. The blue and white uniforms with the Red Star logo had a significant meaning for our team's followers. Collections taken at the games on Fletcher's Field were often donated to the Montreal Council of Unemployed Organizations. The largest crowd ever at the games in Fletcher's Field took place at a soccer game between the Toronto and Montreal WSA clubs in support of Dr. Norman Bethune's Blood Unit in Spain. Many thousands of Montrealers rallied to give their support to the struggle to "Save Democracy in Spain."

The conditions of the 1930s changed the Workers Sports Association. In this defining period, sports entered the realm of politics. In cities such as Lachine, Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, and Vancouver, WSA clubs were under police surveillance. A boxing event was arbitrarily cancelled. In Toronto, hall owners were warned that their hall licences would be cancelled should the premises be rented for WSA functions. A police raid of the Vancouver WSA club led to the confiscation of its membership lists and the club's equipment. This raid came after a baseball game between the Burnaby and Vancouver WSA clubs where an appeal was made to the spectators to protest the charges of sedition against the five speakers who addressed a Montreal meeting of unemployed workers. These repressive actions were aimed at marginalizing the WSAC.

Early in 1931 I received an urgent call to take part in a special Toronto meeting of the national executive committee of the WSAC. Having been released on bail pending our appeal, it was possible for me to attend.

The national executive was burdened with many problems, including the lack of a functioning national office and a national secretary-organizer. I took on the job of national secretary, though the appointment was viewed as provisional, since there was little belief that our appeal would be won. It could be said that there was a race for time.

The recorded minutes of the national executive of 12 March 1931 noted the committee's acceptance of the appeal of the Red Sports International [RSI] to take part in the Spartakiade, the workers sports festival, scheduled to take place in Berlin on 4-12 July 1931. The appeal called for "the militancy of working youth by means of sport to fight against the fascisation of sport."



With less than four months left to develop the campaign, only a partial number of WSA branches became actively involved. The outcome was surprising and unfortunate. Eric Kampainen, from the Thunder Bay region, the decathlon champion of the Finnish Workers Sports Association in Canada, was the first Canadian to leave for the games. He arrived in Berlin prior to the opening day of the festival only to find out that the Social Democratic municipal council had cancelled the games. We were undone by the ongoing split between the Social Democratic Sports International and the RSI.

As WSAC secretary, I was invited to address the annual national conference of the Finnish Workers Sport section in Sudbury. The subject to be addressed was a long-standing unresolved issue: how to achieve the unity of the independent WSA clubs and the Finnish Workers Sports branches throughout the country. The majority of branch representatives at the conference and leaders of the Finnish section supported the idea of the change. Ethnicity, cultural control, and branch independence were not problems. Clubs and branches would control their programs. There was uncertainty about whether the newly formed local and regional committees could fulfill their roles. The challenging campaigns to come would put this to the test.

At this time WSAC consisted of 70 autonomous and independent clubs from coast to coast, with 4,000 members. By 1933, the WSAC reached a membership of 5,000 members.

On 27 February 1932, I received notice that our appeal had been dismissed. In the days that followed there was much to be done, including finding a replacement for the national WSAC secretary. I would be returning to Montreal and entering Bordeaux Jail to serve my sentence with my comrades.

My last weekend in Toronto was filled with farewell events. The last of these took place at the WSA centre at College and Spadina, which housed both the national WSA office and the Toronto branches. At this gathering, Rose Eizenstrauss gave a reading of the poetry of Pauline Johnson. Pauline Johnson was known as Tekahanionwake of the Mohawk tribe. It was said that her “art was her bow, her poems were like arrows.” Rose read impassioned poems against the plunder of the Indian people. “The Song My Paddle Sings” and “Cattle Thief” reached out far beyond the borders of Canada. This dramatic reading was a fitting farewell.

### *Bordeaux Jail*

Returning to Montreal, I surrendered to the police to commence serving my sentence in Bordeaux Jail. Though it was described as a minimum security prison, the high concrete walls surrounding it seemed maximum security to me. At the time, Bordeaux was known as one of the worst of Canada’s penal institutions. With the worsening of the Depression, Bordeaux expressed the ugliest features of the social system. In 1931 and 1932 respectively, 9,284 and 7,920 individual prisoners passed



through the prison gates. The government's approach was more imprisonment and less action to address the conditions that breed poverty.

Prison de Bordeaux, which was constructed between 1908 and 1912, followed what was known as the Pennsylvania model. The first of this type was built in Philadelphia in 1821. Its main feature was its system of "cellular isolation," a penal philosophy focused on isolating prisoners day and night. The cumulative effect of this environment was to separate the prisoner from society and from his family.

What were the conditions confronting the prisoners, serving from thirty days to two years less a day?

We were manacled two by two as we entered the prison van. There was a multiplicity of voices and the perennial questions could be heard: "What are you in for?" and "How much time?" I was handcuffed to a young chap who told me his name was Blackie. When he asked what was the charge against me, I replied "Sedition." He responded, "Oh, seduction. You're in deep trouble."<sup>22</sup>

On arrival at Bordeaux, the process of depersonalization began. You were handed an ill-fitting uniform, trousers with no belt, worn boots (with shoe laces if you were lucky). You were divested of watches, rings, pens, pencils and any other writing materials. Books, magazines, newspapers were prohibited. The watchword was restriction. No radio, no use of the telephone, no tuck shop. We were to expect no favours. The guards escorting the new batch of prisoners to their individual cells were in no mood to answer questions.

The prison consisted of six wings, one being a wing for the criminally insane. The cell, 6 feet, 6 inches wide, 11 feet long and 9 feet high, had a solid iron door at the entry. Prison guards were able to observe the prisoners constantly through the peep hole in each door. These were called Judas doors.

Each cell had a 40-watt bulb in the ceiling. "Lights-out" was at 9 p.m. An iron cot, with a straw-filled mattress called a *paillasse* and a straw-filled pillow, was attached to the wall. During my time in Bordeaux, the *paillasse* cover was never changed. There were no sheets or pillow slips. The cell had a small wash basin and a toilet with no seat. There was no table or chair.

Each cell had a barred window close to the ceiling. If one was able to clamber up and reach the window bars, one could for some minutes see the sky. Most inmates did their time without once seeing the sky. Despite Government penal regulations guaranteeing daily exercise, at no time were most prisoners allowed into the prison yards. The wing I was in was connected to the wing for the criminally insane. These prisoners were allowed to play in the yard every day, which I could observe from my ground-floor-level cell.

The cells in winter time were veritable ice boxes — cold enough to compel inmates to sleep with their clothes and boots on. Solitary confinement was the rule: of

<sup>22</sup>Editor's note: This is very similar to a story told about J.B. McLachlan during his 1924 incarceration at Dorchester repeated in David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto 1999), 340. Thanks to Bryan Palmer for drawing my attention to this coincidence.

the 168 hours in a week, close to 128 hours were spent in solitary confinement. On weekends inmates were locked up in their cells from noon Saturday to early Monday morning. Between Christmas and New Year's, we were in solitary from Saturday noon until Wednesday morning, behind iron doors, shut off from the world.

What about the food? At 6:30 a.m. the iron doors were automatically opened and prisoners were handed their breakfast gruel and small loaves of bread were thrown into the cells. The weak gruel, which the inmates called "scouse," was also our evening meal along with another small prison-baked bread loaf and a cup of strongly brewed tea. At lunch time (the main meal of the day) inmates received a bowl of a watery soup with some small pieces of meat floating around some slices of carrots and melted potatoes. On Fridays, to feed the hundreds of prisoners, the meal consisted of fish soup made with a couple of large fish. No milk, sugar or eggs or butter. No raw vegetables. Most of the meals could be drunk.

On the first day when the guard led me to my cell and the iron door clanged shut, I was left alone with my conscience. I realized I was to spend a year of my life in this place because of my activity on behalf of the unemployed. Here I would spend time with young and old who had committed various crimes. I would spend time with the victims of the Depression: victims of broken homes, victims who had lost their jobs and were helpless in the face of capitalist law. I lay down on my cot. Suddenly I was awakened by awful screaming in the cell next to me. This went on and on. I took my metal bowl and started to bang it against the iron door. The guard came yelling to my cell, "Hey you, be quiet or I'll put you in the hole. This guy is being dried out, he's a drug addict."

Phillipe Richer and myself were in the same wing. We were in the same work crew assigned to clean fifteen toilets each in the morning and to wash the marble floors in the large entrance area in the afternoon, supervised by the prison guard. It took many days to get used to washing the toilets. The guard would keep on repeating loudly, "deeper, deeper, put your hands in deeper." We had no protective gloves and no antiseptic products. Many of us experienced skin infections and boils. We knew of inmates with serious skin diseases. As the boils developed, they would burst under the pressure of the work and blood would flow. The guard would block the hole with Vaseline. Some weeks later the boils would appear again. This was my experience. We never saw a doctor or received any kind of proper first aid. Medical treatment was non-existent.

Letters could only be written once monthly, on one side of a sheet 5½ inches by 9 inches, providing the prisoner had no visitors on the one day a month specified for visits. When Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, my brother sent me a letter referring to "Adolf and the Nazi party." A guard was sent to take me to chief administrator, Levasseur. Flaunting my brother's letter in my face and yelling that this communist propaganda must cease, Levasseur informed me that all mail to me would be stopped. From that day, I was no longer given my mail.

One day I asked one of the guards if there was a library. "Oh yes," he responded. "If you're interested in reading, I'll take you to the library room." I was surprised when I came across a four-volume hard-covered set of *The Forsyte Saga* by Galsworthy. The prison 'librarian' said "You can take the whole set, but don't tear out the pages." I didn't know what he was talking about until I returned to my cell and discovered that there were numerous gaps where pages were missing in each of the four volumes. This edition was printed on soft paper, ideal for rolling the tobacco shag which was given on request to prisoners. The smokers recognized good literature.

Prisons are noted for the profusion of rumours that circulate constantly. Bordeaux Jail was no exception. The rumour was that a hanging was to take place (Bordeaux Jail was the location for most of the hangings in the Province). This was confirmed when the sounds of the gallows being built reverberated through the prison. The scheduled hanging became the main topic of conversation among the prisoners.

One morning, a guard named Belhumeur approached me and called out, "Hey you, take this tray and follow me." We were on our way to the death cell. In this cell were a guard and a smaller cell that housed Blackie, the young fellow who had been my "manacled partner" in the prison van. He remembered me. I was shocked by his appearance. He had lost most of his hair. He was charged with murdering an office building superintendent on St. Catherine Street West while committing a break and entry robbery on a Sunday afternoon. He was in his mid-twenties.

I brought Blackie his last meal. His choice was two hard-boiled eggs, toast, and coffee.

Hangings took place in Bordeaux Jail on Fridays, at 8 a.m. On that day, prisoners were kept in their cells, the prison was quiet. From my cell I saw the arrival of the Hangman Ellis (all hangmen were given the same name to protect their identity). And then we heard the thud. We were each given a package of weed and a good shot of whisky. By 9 a.m. Bordeaux had returned to its normal routine.

On 31 July 1933, on my twenty-first birthday, I was released. I was met outside by my parents, my best friend Rose Eizenstraus, and a representative from the Montreal branch of the Finnish Workers Sports Association.

#### *Youth Against Fascism*

After our release from jail, one of our group, Dave Chalmers, was hurriedly deported to his home city of Edinburgh. The rest of us found ourselves in a wholly new situation: seven months had passed since Hitler's Fascism had seized power in Germany. We had entered the most brutal violent period of human history.

The political scene in Montreal had changed drastically. The city had become the focal point of corporatist fascist activity. The newspaper *Le Devoir*, in alliance with key members of the Catholic hierarchy, promoted the ideology of Mussolini's Italian fascist government. Between 1932 and 1938, numerous articles and editori-

als in *Le Devoir* provided a platform for the fascist-influenced youth organization, Les Jeunes Canada. The journalist André Laurendeau (later to become the influential editor of *Le Devoir*) and Prof. Francois-Albert Anger of the University of Montreal were the driving forces behind the Les Jeunes Canada.

Right-wing students at the University of Montreal were encouraged to organize demonstrations against the local opponents of fascism. They resorted to violence when three representatives from the democratic Spanish republican government came to address the students at McGill. McGill students stationed on the entrance stairs of the Students' Union building where meetings were held had bricks hurled in their direction.

The Mayor of Montreal banned protest meetings supported by labour organizations. The Quebec Board of Censors was hailed by corporatist supporters when it refused permission to screen the film *The Life of Emile Zola* starring Paul Muni.

Confronted by the growing fascist corporatist campaign, the development of the anti-fascist youth movement among young Canadians became a compelling necessity.

In November 1935, a national YCL conference in Toronto altered its program by transforming the YCL into a non-party organization. Abolishing the rigid form of party structure in the YCL enabled clubs to introduce more flexible forms of organization. Putting an end to doctrinism in the YCL led to relationships with mainstream youth organizations.

The Montreal YCL proceeded to open up two youth centres, totally financed by its members. The Youth Centre in St. Henri was pioneering in its use of a store front set-up. The Montreal youth centres attracted young people to participate in cultural and educational programs. There was a merging of religious and secular socialist minded youth finding a basis for unity in the fight against fascism.

When the German cruiser *Emden* visited the Toronto waterfront, it did so at the invitation of the Mackenzie King government in line with its support of the Chamberlain appeasement policy. A call was issued to the left-wing forces in the labour movement to demonstrate against its arrival. The young people who came daily to the new youth centre decided to join the protest.

On the day before the cruiser arrived, I was visited by a young chap introducing himself as Abe. Abe was a member of the YMHA. He came quickly to the point. "You're connected with the YCL and planning the demonstration against the *Emden*. There are a hundred of our boys who wish to join your demonstration, what do you think?" My excited reply came quickly. We agreed to meet at a certain time near the port area. The police had other plans, but there was a demonstration. There were 40 boys from the YMHA and about half that number from the YCL.

When the Cruiser was leaving the Gulf of St. Lawrence, it crossed paths with a ship from England bringing a large number of young German Jewish refugees.

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Montreal was no longer a tranquil place, especially when the high school strike took place. The strike occurred when the Montreal Protestant School Board decided to abolish free high school education in the city. High school students would have to pay a monthly fee for their education. Working-class families, already suffering from the harsh realities of the Depression, now faced an additional burden. Students from Baron Byng High School and Commercial High School were the first to strike. Support for the strike also came from students in the West end high schools.

Each morning during the strike, hundreds of students gathered around the bandstand on Mount Royal. Progress reports were given by the student strike committee. On the third day of the strike, the student committee announced the calling of a public meeting for parents at the Carmen Sylva. I was invited by the committee to join the list of speakers. The majority of parents supported the strike and withstood the angry attacks that came from establishment organizations.

The strike continued for almost a week but ended when the school board proceeded to implement the monthly fee policy. The student action achieved a slight reduction in the level of fee payments, but in the end many students were denied a high school education due to the imposition of fees.

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I had received an invitation from the national office of the YCL, USA. They wanted to know if I would attend a meeting of their national executive committee to tell about some of our recent experiences in the Montreal YCL and our youth centre idea.

I made my visit to the committee and outlined our program on economic, political, and cultural issues. I explained the kind of varied programs that were planned by the youth clubs.

One of the people present was named Max. He launched an aggressive attack against the YCL in Montreal, declaring that "our policy departed from the program of the Young Communist International, and if you continue with your policy, you will be expelled from the movement in Canada." I had never met Max, but I concluded that he was a Communist International representative, the first and only one I had ever met. I stood my ground and did not accept his ultimatum. During this debate, none of the other committee members participated for reasons I discovered later.

On my return home, I reported this incident to the YCL national office and the party leader. I did not receive a response. The unanswered questions remained with me until many years later the mystery was unravelled. Who was this Max? The information that follows was gleaned from the *New York Review of Books*: In 1933, Boris Irmovitch Danemans, Komsomol (YCL of the Soviet Union) leader, persuaded the Comintern to dispatch him to the United States as a guardian of the doctrinal purity of its Young Communist League. He was known as Max and the next three years he sat at meetings in portentous silence that most members found im-

pressive and a few found ominous. In January 1939, Max was ordered home. He refused to go and disappeared. A month later he wrote to Earl Browder: "I can't take it anymore ... I'm a wreck. I acted badly and inexcusably in failing to follow your guidelines ... I am willing to do any service at all to wash away my disgrace ... I am not an enemy, just a bad spineless nobody." Max had declined the YCL offer of an escort for his return to the Soviet Union. It was rumoured that he was a member of the FBI.

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In 1935 and 1936, the WSAC faced its biggest challenge when, under the leadership of the new national secretary Jim Turner, a Finnish Canadian athlete, it undertook a campaign to boycott the Hitler Olympics scheduled to be held in Berlin in 1936.

From the outset the campaign met with strong opposition. The WSA was attacked in the sports pages of the daily press because of its affiliation with the Red Sports International. Among all the sports journalists, less than a handful dared to support the idea of the boycott. The 'Boycott Olympics Committee' in Toronto succeeded in obtaining the support of a number of public figures and labour organizations.

On May 16, less than two weeks before the scheduled opening of the Olympics in Berlin, a coalition of European, Socialist, and Communist federations and federations of labour announced that a summer sports festival, the Workers Olympics, would be held in Barcelona, Spain. A number of national sports organizations in Europe began to push for unity and to patch up the differences between the Social Democratic International and the Red Sports International. But while they jointly supported the Workers Olympics, they were unable to agree on a basis for unity.

The Canadian anti-Olympic committee in conjunction with the Canadian Jewish Congress undertook to send a six-person team to Barcelona. The team included two Jewish boxers, Sammy Luftspring and "Baby Yack," who had been expected to go to Berlin, and Eva Dawes, the 1932 silver medalist in the women's high jump, who had been suspended for life by the AAU for her participation in a WSAC sports tour of the Soviet Union in 1935.

On the morning of 13 July 1936, Madrid radio announced the outbreak of civil war in Spain. The participants in the anti-fascist games were evacuated from Barcelona on the orders of the Catalonian government. In a small Spanish boat, which the Belgians had chartered, a group of 500, including the Hungarian and Belgian teams, sailed overnight to Sete, the first port in France. The only men to remain were those who volunteered in the Loyalist forces, the core of the future International Brigade.

Spain had become the most important political factor in the mid-thirties. Almost 40,000 men from 60 countries went to Spain to aid the newly elected People's Government. Among that number were 1,283 Canadians in the ranks of the Mac-

kenzie-Papineau Battalion. Half of their number sacrificed their lives. Among them were many members of the WSAC.

Recently books have been written by university sports scholars about changing patterns in the field of sports and the effects of the growing sports culture of the younger generation. A book that held special interest for me was *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (1996) written by Bruce Kidd of the University of Toronto. Among the four major national sports organizations critically examined, the chapter "Workers' Sports, Workers' Culture" features the Workers Sports Association of Canada. It tells the story of the efforts of the YCL and the left-wing movement to build it. The author concludes the chapter with these words:

Though their influence is hard to measure, the WSAC and the communist press provided the first systematic critique of capitalist sport to be heard in Canada. Others shared their concern about the alienating nature of professional and highly competitive sports and the legitimizing implications of sports coverage in the mainstream press. It was one of the few organizations during that period to apply the logic of industrial relations in sports and to campaign for the unionization of professional and Olympic athletes.

The questions that the WSA posed are now critically explored as part of the growing sociology of sports. To be sure the WSA shut down its critical faculties when it considered physical activity in the Soviet Union or its own propaganda. But organizers such as Dave Kashtan and Em Orlick and sports writers such as 'Stuffy' Richardson and Bert Whyte encouraged enjoyment of sports and physical activity and critical scepticism about many dominant practices. It is a stance we could well emulate today.