

Laura Hobson Faure

Abraham Plotkin, *An American in Hitler's Berlin: Abraham Plotkin's Diary, 1932-22*, edited with an introduction by Catherine Collomp and Bruno Gruppo, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2009

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- 1 “Here is to my prayer that my hindsight will prove to be as exciting as my lack of foresight,” wrote Abraham Plotkin on the opening page of his diary (3). Plotkin, an unemployed labor organizer who set sail for Europe on October 25, 1932 with the objective of investigating German labor and unemployment policy, answered his own prayer by producing a manuscript whose historical value stems precisely from the author’s lack of foresight. Indeed, unlike historians writing on the rise and early days of the Third Reich, Plotkin witnessed and described Berlin without knowledge of what lay ahead, thus allowing the reader a new perspective on the period. While this can be said of any primary source, Plotkin’s diary provides a particularly compelling and accessible tool for historians and students, who will be intrigued to compare Plotkin’s assessments of singular incidents and events with the larger historical narrative. The skillful editing and thorough introduction by labor historians Catherine Collomp and Bruno Gruppo situates Plotkin in the context of the American labor movement and provides background on the German political landscape, rendering the text accessible to a broad scholarly audience. The diary will interest specialists of labor history and German studies, but also scholars in American history and Jewish studies, as well as those working on immigration and cultural transfers.
- 2 A Russian-born Jew, Plotkin immigrated to the United States in 1901, at the age of eight or nine. His working conditions as a young immigrant, first in Philadelphia and New York and then Chicago, where he set out at the age of 14 or 15, led to a natural interest in labor issues and socialism. Widely read, he attended night school and law school, yet found his calling in union organizing. In the 1920s, he worked in California as the manager for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) and manager and organizer for the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU). Plotkin’s experiences in these two particular unions—due to their membership benefits and organization by industry as opposed to craft—placed him in “the vanguard of the American labor movement” (xxii). Furthermore, due to their primarily Jewish membership and leadership, these unions were at the heart of the Jewish labor movement. Nonetheless, growing unemployment in the United States initially led to a decrease in union membership, and at the end of 1931, Plotkin lost his job. The trip to Germany was thus a creative means of waiting out the early days of the Depression. A great deal of intellectual curiosity and a small living allowance enabled Plotkin to study Berlin’s labor circles while absorbing the cultural life and the foreboding political scene. David Dubinsky, ILGWU president and general secretary, provided Plotkin with an initial letter of introduction to German labor leaders (137). Thus began his informal inquiry, based on the “snow-ball” method, speaking with leaders over endless amounts of beer and coffee, each person recommending another.
- 3 It was in Socialist circles in the United States that Plotkin began learning about the “German model of compulsory social insurance” (xix), a system that had served as a model in the Progressive era, and especially for the ACWA and the ILGWU. This, along with the author’s ability to speak German (at times “tainted” by his command of Yiddish, as we will see) explains why he chose to travel to Germany. It was thus as a student of the “German model” in the framework of a cultural transfer that Plotkin went to Germany to seek answers to the problems that were now plaguing workers in the United States. His central question, at times unknown even to him, was relatively simple: how was the most advanced social welfare system in the

world dealing with the scourge of unemployment? The author's improvised inquiry provides the more specialized reader with a sociological snapshot of the German labor movement in the hours before its demise, and details can be gleaned on the leadership itself and the relationships among labor organizations. The intricate workings of unemployment insurance are discussed at length—and the American student slowly discovers that the German system is “seriously menaced” (111). While initially “impressed with the fact that on the streets there is no evidence of poverty” (6), Plotkin tries to understand how individuals were coping, from prostitutes and street hustlers in the Alexanderplatz district, to the residents of the tenements in the working-class Wedding neighborhood. It is in the latter that, in a powerful passage (December 10, 1932, 56-64), the daily reality of German unemployment seeps in, as each family Plotkin meets explains how much money it receives by whom per month, and enumerates the details of its daily diet. The stench and the mold in the apartments, and especially the hunger of those he encounters overwhelm the author: “Suddenly I turn sick. The whole weight of the meaning bears down—nine people living on less than three quarts of soup—one third of what I ate only a few hours ago; and this repeated day after day until strength and vitality were gone” (61). He grows progressively disturbed as he realizes that the people he sees on the streets have scrubbed their faces and hands, yet can no longer afford to bathe.

4 The evolving notion of time in the diary can also be noted—the slow passage of the hours while one is unemployed is a present theme—Plotkin's journey can be considered an efficient use of this time; yet for others that he encounters, such as Fritz, a twenty-two-year-old who has been out of work for three years, Plotkin's reassurance that “unemployment can't last forever” (21) rings hollow. Plotkin comes to Germany ready to talk, and has no difficulty obtaining meetings with high-placed labor leaders, spending long stretches of time—six hours! (26)—with some. Yet as the political situation grows more intense, the notion of time shifts. After visiting a volunteer camp run by trade unionists, designed to counteract the militarized camps that were being developed by “Hitlerites,” Plotkin wonders about the “volunteer workers,” for whom the camp was an alternative to unemployment: “Twenty weeks of respite... then the street and the daily search for work again. Time is a butcher and the twenty weeks will soon be over... what then?” (72). Indeed, the pace of the diary suddenly changes as political life turns violent, and time starts to move too quickly. Soon after Plotkin's departure from Germany, those he met were running for their lives. In this respect, Abraham Plotkin's diary serves as prerequisite reading for Collomp's work on the rescue of European labor leaders during World War II by the Jewish Labor Committee, as well as Varian Fry's *Surrender On Demand* and Lisa Fittko's *Escape through the Pyrenees*.¹

5 And what about Plotkin? On the first page of his diary he frames his journey as a return to the world he fled: “I came to the shores of the land that became my native land with wonder and dreams and the vague hopes of a child. Or was it the sense of escape from the dark shadows of terror that hovered over Czaristic Russia. The ghetto in old Russia was neither picturesque nor pleasant. [...] Now I am going back” (6). While the trip may have at first symbolized the cathartic return of an immigrant to the “old world,” Plotkin soon becomes aware of the fact that he cannot hide his Jewishness. He is first identified as a Jew by other Jews (November 24, 1932, 13; December 5, 1932, 36-41). But after January 1933, Plotkin is increasingly singled out as a Jew in the context of antisemitism: “I do not speak to Jews!” (January 7, 106) he and his companion are answered when they question someone at a Nazi parade; two days later Plotkin is called a “Jew” by an angry ticket collector who wanted to fine him for not having a train ticket (January 9, 109). Finally, he is warned by one of the employees in his boarding house not to attend a Nazi meeting that would be held at the Bülowplatz, the location of the Communist headquarters:

Stay away from the meeting, he said. I am going to stay in the house all day. I know the district very well. The streets are narrow. Around Bülowplatz is the old Jewish quarters. I am not a Jew but I lived there. I know what the Nazis and the police have done with the Jews on those streets. (January 22, 124)

6 Plotkin discusses German antisemitism with indignation, yet never perceives enough danger to envision his own return to the United States. This is most likely due to the fact that he had stopped writing his diary in mid-February 1933, several months before events made his departure necessary.

7 Finally, the depth of Abraham Plotkin's diary allows us to raise several questions. The editors dedicate part of their introduction to their methodology, and explain that the diary represents a selection of the passages found in the archives. One can thus wonder to what extent certain minor themes were downplayed in order to allow for a more coherent text on labor issues. One also wonders why Abraham Plotkin did not try to publish the diary. The author lived to the age of 95, so we cannot say that time was lacking. Did the self-taught immigrant fear the judgment of others? Was he embarrassed by his own youthful enthusiasm? Or did knowledge of what occurred next make his observations seem naïve? Luckily, the hindsight of two historians now allows this text to perform its rightful role of contributing to our knowledge on the American perception of German labor and the rise of Hitler.

Notes

1 Catherine Collomp, "La Solidarité ethnique et politique dans l'exil: le Jewish Labor Committee et les réfugiés anti-Nazis et anti-fascistes. 1934-1941", *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, n°60, 2000, 23-30 ; "Le Jewish Labor Committee : deux générations de réfugiés politiques", in Catherine Collomp et Mario Menendèz (dir.), *Exilés et réfugiés politiques aux États-Unis. 1789-2000*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2003, 135-48; "The Jewish Labor Committee, American Labor, and the Rescue of European Socialists, 1934-1941," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 68, Fall 2005, 112-33. See also, by both Collomp and Gruppo, "Le Jewish Labor Committee et les réfugiés en France. 1940-1941" in Max Lagarrigue (dir.), *1940. La France du repli. L'Europe de la défaite*, Toulouse, Privat, 2001, 211-46. See also Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, New York, Random House, 1945; Lisa Fittko, *Escape through the Pyrenees*, translated from the German by David Koblick, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2000.

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