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Double Chocolate With Emma And Sasha

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About a year ago, in a review of an anthology of pieces from the Little Review, I was startled by the critic's characterization of Emma Goldman (some of whose letters from prison were reprinted in the book) as "that so different rebel." What startled me was the grotesqueness—to me, at least—of the understatement. The occasional reappearances of Emma in my later life always unnerve me, because she was a major and horrifying figure that cast a shadow over my childhood on Providence Street, in Worcester, Massachusetts. The epithet applied to her there by my elders was so lethal, so searing, that it seemed to me impossible then that anyone could survive it—and yet Emma did. Some years ago, when I met Alla Nazimova at a party, she startled me even more than the understatement of the book review did by her calm declaration that she would like to do a play about Emma Goldman and play the part of Emma. My face must have registered my shock, because Miss Nazimova at once asked me whether I thought her idea was bad. I then had to explain to her that my dismay at her plan transcended any question of theatrical practicality; my reaction to it was in another realm entirely. It was, I told her, as if she had quietly announced her intention of playing Anti-Christ—or, more strictly, Anti-God—and I tried to convey to her the aura, at once mephitic and seductive, that surrounded Emma during my childhood.

One day, when I was still very young, Providence Street began to come alive with rumors and horrid allegations about the proprietors of a new ice-cream parlor that had been opened in our neighborhood. We children were forbidden to patronize the anathematized parlor, and it was a long time before I dared to defy the ban. Since the new entrepreneurs were Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman (whom Miss Goldman called Sasha), some people might have disapproved of them on political grounds; the hatred of the Providence Street parents was founded on religious ones. A dread word was applied to Miss Goldman—for somehow most of the vituperation focussed on her instead of on her consort and partner, Berkman, to whom, Providence Street whispered, she was not mar-

The Bolshevik Myth

Emma left Russia on December 1, 1921. On the train, she writes, "My dreams crushed, my faith broken, my heart like a stone. Matuska Rossiya [Mother Russia] bleeding from a thousand wounds, her soil strewn with the dead. I clutch the bar at the frozen windowpane and grit my teeth to suppress my sobs." Emma must have been among the first in the long procession of the disillusioned.

I Long for Ben Reitman
Despite His Defects, I Love Ben
I Worry About My Face
Billy Sunday Nauseates Me

And so on and on. The page on which Emma describes her disillusion with Most's attitude about Berkman's sacrifice is headed simply "I Horsewhip Johann Most."

In 1919, Emma and Sasha were deported for criminal Anarchy. Thanks to the insistent courtesy of the United States government, they had free passage to their beloved Russia. Just before entering Russia, after crossing Finland locked in a train, with sentries with fixed bayonets inside the cars and on the platforms, Emma writes, "My heart trembled with anticipation and fervent hope." Almost as soon as she and Sasha reached Moscow and got the hang of things in their utopia, their disenchantment began. In swift montage, Emma's headings give a capsule history of her Russian visit:

We Are Dazzled by the Results in Russia
I Begin to Wonder
Jack Reed Bursts in on Me
I Will Not Believe What See
Tyranny in Russia
Lenin Sends for Sasha and Me
Lenin Talks to Us
Russia Lies Fallow
I Clash with Soviet Officials
We Get Comrades out of Jail
Misery in the Factories
Suspicious Bertrand Russell
Lenin, the False Messiah
My Disillusionment Persists
"The Revolution, What Has Become of It?"
Respect for Human Life: A Rarity

ried! Some idea of the virulence of the term used to describe Miss Goldman may be gathered from the fact that after the utterance of it the other accusation—that she and Berkman were not married—took on an aspect not so much of derogation as of amiable gossip. The epithet was the word "apikorista," a word that to my elders connoted the ultimate in human depravity. An apikoros—apikorista was the feminine Yiddish form of this Hebrew word—was a renegade from the Jewish religion, but the word had the even deeper and more sinister connotation of treachery not merely to the Jewish religion but to God himself. That there existed such a person as an apikorista scarcely bore thinking about, and I remember distinctly the horror I felt when I heard the word used to describe a tangible, visible person who actually lived and was doing business in our midst. I knew that there must be people who had defied God, because how otherwise could the word have come into existence, but here it was applied to a person whom one saw on the streets and who actually had a store within walking distance of one of the stricter synagogues. I remember telling Miss Nazimova that after thirty years or so I could not suppress a feeling of dismay that anyone, even an actress as boldly vital as she was, should express the wish, of her own free will and in public, to portray an out-and-out apikorista!

Although the word "apikoros" is Hebrew, it comes from the Greek "Epikouros." This is, of course, the name of the philosopher Epicurus, so that etymologically Emma was merely an Epicurean, which is not, in more liberal circles, a fighting word. It still takes considerable effort for me to realize that an apikorista is, after all, only a lady freethinker or skeptic. But these last are agreeable words; "freethinker" even has an implication of independence that is admirable. There must be a fierce history behind the assimilation into Hebrew of the Greek word, stemming from the ancient days when many Jews were seduced by the blandishments of the Greek philosophy of hedonism. The misinterpretation of Epicureanism as a philosophy of unbridled license no doubt led

to a further identification of it with a defiance of God, and thus to the Hebrew religious formalists the word "apikoros" eventually became a symbol of the ultimate sin—atheism. Therefore, to be an apikorista was no laughing matter; the word carried such a weight of obloquy that it was applied only to those guilty of the most monstrous of human delinquencies. Providence Street first heard merely that Miss Goldman was an Anarchist, and we children repeated the news with scoffing ribaldry. I did not know what "Anarchist" meant, exactly, and to me the word had no more than a pleasant reverberation of wickedness. Even to my elders, it seemed to make Emma simply a figure of fun, for as a cult Anarchism had no adherents on Providence Street. But now my elders were calling her an apikorista as well, and where God was involved, the orthodox of Providence Street permitted no latitude.

I remember that before I ever saw Miss Goldman, I used to lie awake at night thinking about her fearfully and trying to imagine her appearance, which I am sure I must have invested with the traditional properties of diabolism. The thought that I might one day see her—pass her in the street—filled me with terror; I hoped that such a disastrous accident would not occur. She was an acute bogey, and even after she and Berkman left Worcester, impelled by their solemn decision to shoot Henry Clay Frick (which Emma describes in her autobiography, "Living My Life," with that extraordinary, humorless intensity characteristic of saints and fanatics), her legend was perpetuated. The Providence Street parents cited her to us constantly, using her name somewhat as English parents used Napoleon's in the first decades of the nineteenth century, to frighten and to admonish. For the orthodox elders of the Providence Street synagogues, Alexander Berkman's attempt to assassinate Frick was a miraculous piece of luck. "What could you expect?" they demanded of us children, as if we were somehow subtly involved in the attentat, and as if they took it for granted we were all potential agnostics. ("Attentat" is a favorite word of Emma's, by the way, and it recurs throughout her autobiography.

are extremely diverting and various; by merely following them, without reading the text beneath, you may quickly get a running record of a lively career. For example:

I Divorce My Husband
 I Remarry Kershner [her husband] and Leave Him
 Again
 My Doubts About Nihilism Disappear
 Johann Most: Preceptor
 I Dedicate Myself to Most's Happiness
 I Advocate Free Love
 Am Drawn to Sasha
 I Give Myself to Sasha
 I Respond to Fedya

The last two heads run on facing pages. Then come:

I Belong Entirely to Sasha
 I Plan My First Lecture Tour
 Most Confesses Love for Me
 Most Wants Merely the Female
 Sasha Plus Most Equals Fedya
 I Refuse to Bear Children
 Most Stirs Me Profoundly
 "Love, Love—There Is Only Sex!"
 Blackwell's Island Claims Most
 Sasha Plans an Attentat
 —and Insists on Executing It Alone
 I Find Love in the Arms of Ed
 Ed Shows a Conservative Streak
 I Leave Ed
 My Reactions to Procreation Among the Poor
 The President [McKinley] Dies. Am I Sorry?
 We Must Try to Help Czolgosz

ary editor of the time named Johann Most. In fact, Emma writes that it was from Most's book "Science of Revolutionary Warfare" that Sasha, a tyro, had got his first shy hints about bomb-making. It "was a good textbook," says Emma. Now, to Emma's profound disgust, Most's paper, Freiheit, came out with an article denouncing the attack on Frick. Aspersions were cast on Berkman's motives. There was even a suggestion that he had shot Frick with a toy revolver and that that was why Frick was still alive. This slander arouses Emma's fierce indignation:

I was stung to the quick. I knew that Sasha had never had much practice in shooting. Occasionally, at German picnics, he would take part in target-shooting, but was that sufficient? I was sure that Sasha's failure to kill Frick was due to the cheap quality of his revolver—he had lacked enough money to buy a good one.

She has another explanation to cover Sasha's inefficiency:

Perhaps Frick was recovering because of the attention he was getting? The greatest surgeons of America had been called to his bedside. Yes, it must be that; after all, three bullets from Sasha's revolver had lodged in Frick's body. It was Frick's wealth that was enabling him to recover. I tried to explain this to the comrades, but most of them remained unconvinced. Some even hinted that Sasha was at liberty. I was frantic—how dared they doubt Sasha? I would write him! I would ask him to send me word that would stop the horrible rumors about him.

In any case, by not dying Frick blurred the impact of Berkman's act.

Emma has the engaging habit, in her autobiography, of putting a summarizing running head at the top of each page. These beads

Webster defines it as "an attempt, especially an unsuccessful one, to commit a crime of violence.") "What could you expect of people who don't believe in God?" said our elders. "Naturally, such people are murderers!"

Finally, I met Emma Goldman. All my life I have told the same story of how it happened, and I told it that night to Alla Nazimova:

One day when I was grubbing in the cinders of the empty lot next to the Crompton & Knowles factory, on Winter Street, where I used to hunt for bits of glass and metal, I was picked up and walked home by Allie London. He was several years older than I, and I trudged along happily beside him.

"Where do you think I've been?" said Allie, with a kind of glowing, suppressed bravado.

I guessed the lake. I guessed Bancroft Tower.

Allie smiled at these conventional guesses. "I have just had a college ice"—late-nineteenth-century for sundae—"at Emma Goldman's," he announced sturdily.

I was aghast. I couldn't believe it. I stared at Allie, expecting that his appearance would have been somehow altered by the dread contact. Had there been incipient horns sprouting from his forehead, I would not have been surprised. But Allie looked about the same.

"How was it?" I finally managed to stammer.

"Wonderful!" said Allie enthusiastically. "She gives you a double helping for the same money. I'm not going to Pop Webster's any more."

"But I mean"—I could not bring myself to say the name—"she?"

Allie, an extrovert and already emancipated from orthodoxy, was impatient. "I tell you she gives you double. I asked for vanilla and she put on a scoop of strawberry, too. Same money."

I walked along beside Allie in a turmoil, convinced that by the necromancy of the extra scoop Emma had already begun to draw him into her coils.

"Did you see her?" I asked finally.

"Sure I saw her. She served me. Saw her feller, too. They had a fight. I could hear 'em in the back room. They're not married, you know. They had a whale of a fight."

This startled me. Up to then, I had thought that only married people fought. Under the circumstances, it seemed almost unfair for the Goldman-Berkman ménage to assume this prerogative of respectability.

A few days later, Allie again interrupted my excavations in Crompton & Knowles' cinder yard. "Want a treat?" he shouted cheerily.

Of course I did, but as I trotted along beside him, I was suddenly assailed by fear. "You taking me to Webster's?" I asked hopefully.

"Not using Webster's any more, I told you. I'm taking you to Goldman's. She gives you double. Don't know how she makes it pay, but that's her lookout."

It was also mine. I felt that my immortal soul hung in the balance. I whimpered, "Suppose my folks hear about it?"

"You don't believe that stuff, do you?" said Allie masterfully.

I have carried all my life a vivid impression of the subsequent scene in the ice-cream parlor. Berkman I do not seem to remember at all except for his voice, but I have always retained a clear picture of Miss Goldman—of her look of ineluctable benevolence, of her great mop of unruly red-blond hair, of her smile, and of her eyes, which I have always been sure were blue. I remember the shock of discovering that she was not frightening; it was my introduction, I have always believed, to the tangled world of reality, in which even the despised, the criminal, the fanatically wrongheaded, the hopelessly perverted may yet have a certain charm.

The counter was neat, and the blowzy-headed, benevolent deity stood behind it. When Allie asked me what I wanted, I was tongue-tied; I fully expected some emanation from the apikorista to pulverize me. Did she say, to temper Allie's impatience, "Take your time, my boy, there's no hurry"? I have always believed so. I managed finally to articulate a desire for chocolate. When it came—

paper. Then she ran to Sasha with the news. The project to go to Russia was abandoned; it was supplanted by the more immediate necessity of getting rid of the tyrant of Homestead—Henry Clay Frick. There follows Emma's description of a protracted argument: Should she go or should he go? There was no doubt in Beckman's mind that he should go; Emma agreed to this but insisted that she must accompany him. No, said Sasha; she had a gift for words, a knack for propaganda. He must go to Pittsburgh and deal with Frick personally, and Emma must remain behind to tell about it. The argument went on for a long time, and Emma sorrowfully describes how she lost it.

Emma then describes the astonishment of the landlord, Allie's uncle's friend, when she told him they were giving up the business. They gave him that day's receipts as a settlement for back rent—seventy-five dollars—and took the next train to New York. The subsequent events are grimly and fantastically farcical, though Emma appears to have had no glimmering of that. They at once set about manufacturing a bomb. On this task, Sasha promptly wasted forty dollars, because he appears to have had no knack for bomb-making. But the impulse for a rendezvous with Mr. Frick was so imperious that Sasha left for Pittsburgh anyway. Emma remained behind in New York, and decided that in order to aid Sasha with money she would become a streetwalker—an avocation for which she seems to have had as little aptitude as Sasha had for bomb-making. The only man who picked her up was an elderly intellectual, who gave her ten dollars and ran away at her suggestion that perhaps she ought to earn it. Meanwhile, in Pittsburgh, Berkman had managed to buy a cheap revolver. Gun in hand, he strolled into Frick's private office (how accessible those early tycoons must have been!) and shot him. He failed to kill him, but he wounded him seriously. Emma immediately started organizing mass meetings to celebrate the attentat. But when Frick refused to die, there was much sneering and headshaking in Anarchist circles in New York. Emma's inspiration in Anarchy had been a well-known revolution-

I had been born early enough to remember visiting Emma Goldman's ice-cream parlor, I would have been well over twenty when I graduated. This seems unlikely, since I always appeared to be about the same age as my classmates. I can only regretfully conclude that my meeting with Emma never happened. My older brothers certainly grew up sniffing the effluvium of Emma's reputation, and it seems probable that I appropriated their memories of her for my own. Did I materialize the lurid gossip about Emma, which threaded Providence Street like a contaminated brook long after she had left Worcester, into a personal experience and annex the apikorista into my private mythology? It seems probable. I certainly dreamed about her—a female Devil without horns but with suitably flaming hair. My memory of her is so vivid that I still see that tousled head, hear that argument, and taste that double chocolate. But I now reluctantly accept the fact that all these years I must have been experiencing these things at second hand.

It was only when I read Emma's autobiography that I discovered that she and Berkman gave up their ice-cream business in Worcester not because they were skeptics but because they were fanatical believers. I nurtured for years the little mystery of the high-voiced arguments in the back room; when I came to read Emma's autobiography, I solved it. Emma and Sasha had decided that America was too materialistic for the revolution; it became clear to them that by accelerating a revolution in Russia they might create a model for one here. To get the money for the trip to Russia, they drifted to Worcester and set up the ice-cream parlor. Business flourished; they were practically on their way. One day, a customer, while eating his ice cream, was reading a paper. Emma's roving eye caught the headline: "LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN HOMESTEAD—FAMILIES OF STRIKERS EVICTED FROM THE COMPANY HOUSES—WOMAN IN CONFINEMENT CARRIED OUT INTO STREET BY SHERIFFS." Emma, as she herself tells it, made an instant deal with the man. She told him that he could have his ice cream free if he would let her read his

double scoop, twice what you would have got at Pop Webster's—Allie gave me the triumphant side glance of the successful prospector.

Miss Goldman left us, and we sat at the counter and ate. Soon, from the back room, came the lifted voices—Emma's and Berkman's. Allie looked at me significantly. "Fighting again," he whispered.

I have always flattered myself that I was more discerning than Allie that day. Though the voices were lifted, I sensed that it was not in anger or recrimination. The language they spoke was neither English nor Yiddish; the Yiddish I spoke at home and the English I spoke on the streets and in school were the two languages I knew, so I could not know that those loud words were Russian. But I sensed that there was no anger in the intonation; the discussion had the volume and the intensity of a quarrel but no animus. It was even sorrowful. I wondered. I wondered deeply.

When I got home, my sense of guilt was so profound that I was sure my mother would immediately see that I had done something wrong. But she didn't. I went to sleep that night with the pleasurable, lawless feeling that this was, after all, a world in which crime could go undetected. After that, I went to Emma's whenever Allie asked me. There were few excursions that could satisfy, simultaneously and so fully, a boy's natural instincts for the illicit and for the wholesome. It was like comfortably spooning up delicious ice cream in the Inferno. Nickels didn't come my way very often, and when I was not invited by Allie, I fell into the habit of wandering by the forbidden ice-cream parlor in the hope that something would turn up. Nothing ever did. I even remember wondering whether, since Emma gave you a double scoop for one nickel, she might not be so quixotic as to give you one scoop for nothing. I never tested it out.

But whenever I did go into Emma's baleful precincts, I always heard the eternal chain argument from the back room. It went on and on, the voices rising and falling, intense without bitterness, vi-

olent without anger. One day, I got a nickel of my own, the gift of a prodigal uncle, and with it clutched in my palm I made at once for Emma's. To my consternation, the place was closed. I peered inside. The room was dismantled—chairs heaped one on top of the other. The kindly Devil and her voluble consort were gone. I turned away disconsolate. Without Mme. Mephistopheles, Worcester seemed less like Heaven than usual.

I discussed the vanished couple with Allie. His uncle was a friend of their landlord. Allie told me that to the landlord the sudden decision of his tenants to give up the parlor had seemed an act of pure insanity, for the place had been doing a land-office business in spite of the disapproval of Providence Street. Evidently the double scoops of ice cream had paid off, for the profits were fabulous; they sometimes, said the landlord, came to fifty dollars a week. (The standards of affluence in those days were fairly modest; I remember that an uncle of mine who was not on speaking terms with one of his brothers denounced him to me one day, capping his long complaint with the bitter remark "And with all this he is a Gvir [a Croesus]!" This surprised me; the Gvir seemed as shabby and ineffectual as my other uncles. I expressed my doubt. "Why," shouted my uncle, "in the real estate alone he has four hundred dollars!") To give up a thriving business for no reason, in the full tide of success, was unheard of on Providence Street. "But what can you expect?" the landlord said to Allie's uncle in final summary, shrugging his shoulders. "What can you expect of an apikorista who isn't even married?"

Everything about Emma's legend was shocking, but the greatest shock of all was to come when, after telling Miss Nazimova my story, which all my life I had devoutly believed, I was impelled to read Emma's autobiography. From it I discovered that Emma had been in business in Worcester in 1892, in the months immediately preceding the shooting of Frick, and that just prior to the attempted assassination she and Berkman had left Worcester, never to return. Now, I have always written in my passport applications

that I was born in 1893, but it is a factitious date, because I have never known my actual birth date. The reason for this lamentable ignorance is as follows: My father entered all our births as they occurred—my two brothers', my sister's, and mine—in Hebrew on the inside back cover of one of his volumes of the Talmud. Since he figured our births according to the Hebrew calendar, this automatically gave me a three-thousand-year jump on my contemporaries. Even as a child, this made me feel superannuated, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I let it pass; the task of translating the date into a more contemporary system was too complicated. There came a day, though, when this archaic computation of my father's was to cause me acute embarrassment. It happened during class at the Providence Street School, when our teacher, probably because she was unable to find my age in her records, took it into her head to ask me suddenly when I was born. I discovered, equally suddenly, that I didn't know. I didn't answer, and she repeated the question, somewhat sharply. I couldn't risk telling the truth—that I didn't know my birthday. I was ashamed to confess it before the whole class, so I quickly improvised one. "June," I heard myself saying. "June what?" the teacher demanded. "June 9th," I said. The teacher must have felt that she was dealing with a congenital idiot. "The year?" she said wearily. "Do you mind telling me the year?" "Eighteen-ninety-three," I stammered, picking what seemed like a good one.

This improvisation became fixed; it has served as well as any other, and until I read Emma Goldman's autobiography it did not trouble me that it made little pretension to accuracy. I have long since forgotten the Hebrew date of my birth, and my father's many-volume Talmud was long ago given away, so I cannot look up that recording and translate it into a date in our calendar. I have made several attempts to get the official date of my birth from the City of Worcester, but without success; there is no record there of my ever having been born. But common sense tells me that 1893 must be reasonably close. I graduated from high school in 1911, and if