
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by Morris Wolf:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Ann Rivington, 1940

Typewritten document in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society,
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Morris Wolf was on the local and state Central Committees of the Socialist Party of Ohio from 1908 to 1919. A member of the Party before Ruthenberg, Wolf became a lawyer in 1914. He represented the Socialist Party from 1915 to 1920. He worked as the attorney for Ruthenberg, Baker, and Wagenknecht in 1917, working jointly with Joseph Sharts of Dayton.

Margaret Prevey called me from Akron. She said she was informed that serious punishment was being meted out to C.E. Ruthenberg because he sassed the supervisor in jail. I was not allowed to see C.E. — only Wag and Baker. They didn't know what the punishment was. In the front room I accused the supervisor of whipping him, stringing him up by the thumbs, hoping to get admissions from him. It worked. He told me Ruthenberg tried to run the jail, was impudent. I insisted on seeing C.E. or I would put a big writeup in the *Cleveland Press* about the torturing of prisoners.

C.E. almost had to be helped into the room. He slumped over and began crying. The supervisor retreated. He told me he had been strung up by the thumbs so the tips of his shoes barely touched the floor. He was pale, in very bad shape, couldn't stop crying, near collapse. I called in the supervisor and called him everything I could think of. C.E. denied everything. The supervisor promised to let C.E. do office work if the *Cleveland Press* would not get the story. The rest of his stay he was even allowed to drive the car outside the jail by himself, worked in the offices, received privileges no other than the richest prisoners received. This happened probably sometime in May

[1918]. I remember it was in the spring. About half of his time was [already] served. In the workhouse, first it was the kitchen, then they were put in the laundry as punishment.

Everybody liked Wag — he got along all right. C.E. had a messianic complex — thought he was a leader of the world. He had a habit of talking down. The laundry was a clean place for a small town jail. It was considered above the jails in Cleveland, it was not a steam laundry. He was not doing manual work. Even when he was a “bad prisoner” they treated him with a certain degree of deference. He inspired both hatred and deference.... Sharts did not know — or like — C.E. I was attorney for all three. When Ruthenberg’s case came up in Michigan, I advised him and prepared his material.

Later, after he was in Chicago with the CP and I was out, I advised and visited him and we were very friendly, still....

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Ruthenberg was anxious to make speeches. When he spoke, every other word was “Jesus.” His messianic complex was strong.... He had a sharp intellect. His son Danny has a softer face and softer eyes. C.E. was a hard-boiled zealot who might as well have been an army officer. Nothing soft about him....

C.E. had a rare capacity for getting the most important elements out of sociology books. His memory of details was bad, but his memory of larger trends was good. He was familiar with the Socialsit writers. He could get the gist of a writer’s book by glancing at it. He had no friends. He was not a person whom everyone likes. I don’t regard Ruthenberg as consequential.

C.E. had battles with himself less than any man. He felt there was a chance of making a mistake by hesitating as much by rushing. He had a sort of deliberate impulsiveness. He was sarcastic because of envy — not envy because of riches, but envy over others’ ability to be liked. He made caustic observations. Wag once made a speech to the Central Committee in which he said the word “understanding” a dozen times. Said C.E., “He’s still bellyaching about the understanding of the understanding.”

Wag was harder to fathom than C.E. I never knew when Wag meant what he said, but I always knew when C.E. meant what he said.... C.E. made up his mind to be a leader, to be a great worker. He stayed at the office till 2 or 3 am, got back at 7:30 in the morning.

He worked harder than anyone else and expected other people to work harder.

He loved words for their sound and color. He used orientalisms in his speeches and he mixed metaphors. His objective was to become greater — to project Ruthenberg as a personality. therefore he had to be honest, punctilious, and unsparing. A great leader was like that. Morgan was our local secretary. C.E. took the keys away from him to audit the books and \$1400 or \$1500 was missing. C.E. got Morgan kicked out. Later C.E. was secretary.

The same man could shoot his friends after the revolution. Strong, unswerving, dynamic.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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