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# Interview with Ludwig E. Katterfeld

## by Theodore Draper

### [conducted September 8, 1956]

A document in the Hoover Institution Archives, Theodore Draper Papers, box 30.

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#### Early Communist Conventions.

**Draper:** *Now at this convention — the first Bridgman convention — Wagenknecht was named Executive Secretary of the UCP and Ruthenberg editor of the official organ.*

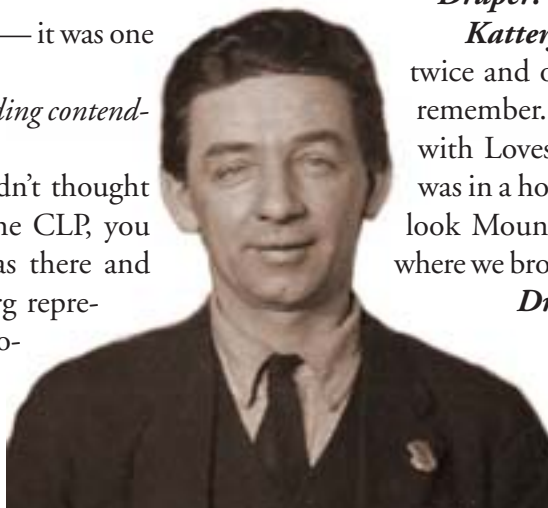
**Katterfeld:** Yes.

**Draper:** *Now the problem that arises here is why Wagenknecht and not Ruthenberg? Wasn't Ruthenberg the strongest figure? Or was it due to the fact that in the amalgamation the forces of the Communist Labor Party tended to dominate, and Wagenknecht came from the Communist Labor Party? Does this represent a problem to you or isn't it worthy?*

**Katterfeld:** Not especially — it was one or the other.

**Draper:** *They were the leading contenders.*

**Katterfeld:** You see, I hadn't thought of it especially before but of the CLP, you see, the entire organization was there and brought in, whereas Ruthenberg represented only a fraction — the so-called English expression of the other one — and it was very doubtful how much of the organization he could bring with



him, and he certainly had changed his mind more than anybody I've ever seen. You see, originally he based the party on the foreign federations and we had quite an issue over that. And here at Bridgman his attitude was abolish all the foreign federations. And we didn't go on with that. Our idea was that we should have the foreign language branches to carry on work in those languages but not as official parts of the party as such — as languages.

**Draper:** *Now, I'm going to jump to the Woodstock convention. And the Woodstock convention represents the first temporary unification. It didn't stick but...*

**Katterfeld:** Wait — you mean the one in the farmhouse or the one up on the hill in the hotel?

**Draper:** *Well, that's the one upstate.*

**Katterfeld:** Yes. But we met up there twice and once it was merely our UCP, as I remember. That's where I had that argument with Lovestone and the Unity Convention was in a hotel on top of the mountain [Overlook Mountain House], later on, and that's where we brought about unity between the two.

**Draper:** Yes —

**Katterfeld:** And Gitlow and I were put jointly in charge.†

**Draper:** *That's the one I'm referring to. Now, here again we have a published report of what*

†- Katterfeld mis-speaks or mis-remembers here. On Feb. 11, 1920, Ben Gitlow was sentenced to 5-10 years of hard labor by the judge in his New York trial. He was not released from Sing Sing Penitentiary until the middle of April 1922, well after completion of both the May 1920 Bridgman Unity Convention (joining the CLP and Ruthenberg-CPA to form the UCP) and the May 1921 Woodstock Unity Convention (joining the UCP and the old CPA to form the unified CPA). Alfred Wagenknecht was formally named the Executive Secretary of the UCP at Bridgman — although it was Katterfeld who delivered the extremely important report of the Central Executive Committee to the subsequent Unity Convention. Katterfeld's recollection of being "jointly in charge" helps to explain the seeming anomaly of his having delivered the main report of the UCP instead of Executive Secretary Wagenknecht ("Paul Holt") at the May 1921 Convention at Woodstock.

went on, and according to this published report, there was much difficulty in obtaining unity there. It says that it took two weeks to achieve unity at Woodstock. And full agreement had been reached on the program, the problem arose of how many members to put on the Executive Committee and what to do about the controversial foreign language federations. The Committee on Constitution split, 3 to 3. Then the convention split 30 to 30. At 11 o'clock at night, after a long, acrimonious day, a split became imminent and the official account of the convention says: "No constitution had been adopted, the convention was hopelessly deadlocked, neither side left their seats. No motions were made, no one took the floor. The chairman announced that he would entertain a motion to adjourn. This was answered by the humming of "The Internationale." The chairman waited and then declared the session adjourned and left the chair." This is right out of the official report. Then it says that no one dared to move, fearing that they would never get together again. At this point, an unidentified Comintern delegate saved the day. He proposed that the delegates should separate into two caucuses which would negotiate through small committee. The caucusing continued all night, the committees met the following day, and finally an arrangement was worked out. Now, according to my information, this was not a real Comintern delegate either. The information I have is that it was Professor Hartmann.

**Katterfeld:** Hartmann was the chairman.

**Draper:** ...and he merely acted as chair...

**Katterfeld:** He was the chairman throughout the meeting.

**Draper:** Hartmann then was the chairman throughout the meeting. I see. And that he didn't represent...

**Katterfeld:** ...and he was a good chairman. He was as nearly impartial in his conduct as a human being could be.

**Draper:** I see. So when the chairman is referred to in his report, it's really Hartmann.

**Katterfeld:** Yes.

**Draper:** There was some confusion about it.

**Katterfeld:** And this other — somehow I don't remember — I don't remember it.

**Draper:** You don't remember. Well, the report...

**Katterfeld:** ...when I was in we had — we didn't have to wait until the end for the two caucuses. There were two caucuses throughout. In fact, there were cau-

cus within the caucus, and within our caucus the Lovestone element, I think, had a majority of one.

**Draper:** When you say the Lovestone element, whom do you mean, besides Lovestone himself?

**Katterfeld:** Let's see — who always — a little hard to define, but there was Lindgren and Amter and Wagenknecht and myself and so on, that were from the CLP. And the other group had come in after, I think, and upon the election for the committee the CLP element didn't get elected. They had a solid caucus, except myself, and I found out afterwards that that was no special merit for me but that one of them had been instructed to cast a ballot for me, so as not to have them excluded. Now, that's the way I remember it.

**Draper:** Does anything else of importance stick out in your memory about the Woodstock convention?

**Katterfeld:** The constant fear that this was going to be raided — always watching for cavalcades of cars to come up. And nothing happened.

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### John Pepper.

**Draper:** Now, by 1922 the factional fight between the "Geese" and the "Liquidators" was taking place in full force. You recall that in 1922 there was more or less a three-fold split. There was first the extremists — the underground extremists — who used to be called in that period "Left Opposition." Originally, Ballam belonged to that group, Dirba belonged to them, Wicks belonged, and a number of people. They had the Russian Federation and the Slav Federations behind them. And they were totally opposed to any kind of a legal party. Then, on the other side, there was another type of split between the so-called "Geese" and the "Liquidators." As I understand it, the "Geese" stood for having both a legal and an illegal party, both of them controlled by the illegal party. The "Liquidators," of whom Bedacht, Ruthenberg, Cannon, Lovestone, were a part, wanted, so to speak, to liquidate the illegal party in one form or another. And in 1922 the big struggle took place between the "Geese" and the "Liquidators." In this period you sided with the "Geese" and belonged to the "Geese" faction. Now, as I understand it, actually the "Geese" faction had a...majority or the two were pretty evenly divided. Do you have an impression on that score?

**Katterfeld:** Well, I remember — it's a valid one — in a meeting on that issue where...

**Draper:** *In a meeting where?*

**Katterfeld:** It was here in New York, a district meeting. And Pepper supported the other side. And then I explained how Pepper happened to be here. He didn't like it. He was not appointed a delegate.

**Draper:** *Did you know — were you quite aware of the circumstances of his coming here?*

**Katterfeld:** Well, he tried to get me when I was over there to arrange it so that he could come over. You see, they had had a factional struggle within the Hungarian party, and he was the chief kingpin in one of the factions. What the issues were I don't know at all. But they were brought together there and put on the carpet and they found fault with both sides, and he was one of those — I think there were several — that were told to keep hands off that party, altogether, for a full year. And so it was during that year he wanted to come over here. And I thought we had plenty of that sort of thing already without him, so I didn't help him any. But how he got the necessary approval to come, I don't know. I'm sure he wasn't an official delegate sent here, because they wouldn't do that. But he posed as such.

**Draper:** *And was largely accepted as such, wasn't he?*

**Katterfeld:** Oh, yes, oh, yes. And he was a very capable man. He immediately started to study the problems here, and so on... Aside from that one thing [a propensity for factionalism], like so many, he was very good. But on this — when I made my talk he turned around and he says, "*Ich werde sie politisch töten!*"

**Draper:** *This was after Bridgman [Aug. 1922]?*

**Katterfeld:** It must have been.

\* \* \*

**Katterfeld:** He was at our house — when we lived up in the Bronx — he came there several times. When I told my wife last night about the talk with you she recalled various ones, and she remembered him.

**Draper:** *What was your impression of his personality — the sort of person he was? As objectively as possible, despite the trouble you had with him in those years.*

**Katterfeld:** Well, I said he was a very capable man.

**Draper:** *He soon learned how to speak English,*

*didn't he?*

**Katterfeld:** Yes.

**Draper:** *Because I understand when he came here he didn't know too much English but in a very short time picked it up.*

**Katterfeld:** Oh, yes — he was brilliant.

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### The 4th Congress of the Comintern.

**Draper:** *Well then, after the Bridgman convention, at the end of the year comes the 4th Congress [of the Comintern]. It took place from November 5 to December 1922, and you went to the 4th Congress as one of the delegates.*

**Katterfeld:** Yes.

**Draper:** *And that, I understand, represented the second time that you went to Moscow. How did it happen that you were elected delegate? Was it because you were considered one of the strongest spokesmen of the "Geese" faction? Or how did that take place?*

**Katterfeld:** That I'm not sure of. The first time that I was sent I suspected that that was partly to get me out of the way. I'm not sure of that. It was never mentioned but that's how I explain it — partly why they were willing that I should go. But the second time I don't think that entered into it at all. I think they thought that I was competent to go there, and I was sent.

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**Draper:** *During the period of the 4th Congress, does your memory yield up any interesting experience, anything that strikes you as most notable, or most important, or worth recording of the months that you spent in Moscow then?*

**Katterfeld:** You mean concerning the American party?

**Draper:** *Either concerning the American party, primarily, or your general impression of how things were handled.*

**Katterfeld:** Well, one thing that impressed me all that time that I was over there was the way the Russian party functioned. And it was just the opposite from what most people think. That is, they have the idea there's a bunch of bearded Russians or something, sitting in that secret room and deciding what

should be done and then coming and ordering the rest of us around. And they went to the other extreme. Now, the Russian party with all its strength never had more than 5 votes in the Congress — same representation as our little dinky group here in the United States, 5 votes. That's one thing — that is, their control was ideological and never mechanical. And I thought that was admirable. And then I'd been asked about this point of how they dealt with questions from other countries, which they did. Now I sat in on the commission to consider the issue between the Zionists and another group — not quite the Zionists but they were close together but violently opposed to each other. I sat in on the commission where the question came up from France, raised by the Italian party, about their permitting people that were members of the Masonic Lodge to be officials of the party. Trotsky was chairman of that, and it was conducted mostly in French, and a very nice looking girl from England sat right next to me. She knew both French and English and she would tell me what's going on. And I sat on a commission on the Korean question. There were two groups, even at that time, from Korea.... I was on a commission that had a question come up from England — the British Communist Party — whether it would be better for them to work entirely independently or to work with the Labour Party. And the advice there was that they should work with the Labour Party whenever possible. But it was never anything that was binding on them, but that's what the people from various countries, who were not mixed up in the thick of it, thought when that was explained to them. And I think that's a good way to handle things. I understand afterwards it developed more into what people thought it was all the time. Now I think that kind of an International serves a useful purpose, as long as they don't try to dictate and force anything down people's throats.

### **Zinoviev and Trotsky.**

**Draper:** Was Zinoviev, by all odds, the strongest personality in the Comintern?

**Katterfeld:** I don't think so. He was the most — what do you call it?

**Draper:** Talkative?

**Katterfeld:** No, but he never was on time.

**Draper:** *The most tardy?*

**Katterfeld:** Yes, he had too much to do. I was on a little committee to study the problems of the apparatus there, the functioning of it. That was one recommendation — that Zinoviev should either be the head of the International or the Mayor of Leningrad, but not both. He was commuting back and forth. And it was nothing at all for a big committee, people from all countries, sitting around at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Late in the afternoon you got word that Zinoviev should be there in the evening. And that wasn't good. It was a very interesting time.

**Draper:** *Yes. Now, according to Cannon and according to a book written by Claude McKay, the Negro poet, it was Trotsky who took the first strong position amongst the Russians in favor of the "Liquidators" and that this took place at the end of the 4th Congress. \* \* \** What was your impression of the man?

**Katterfeld:** Well, he also was a capable man. They had plenty of capable people...

**Draper:** *Yes.*

**Katterfeld:** ...and he was prompt. One thing that impressed me was the big anniversary celebration that was held on the Red Square [Nov. 7, 1922]. See, everything started late that Zinoviev had to do with. And this was under Trotsky's control. And when the big church bell rang — it's first gong — the bands started up, 20 bands right across the Square, military bands. Everything was in position at the moment the thing was supposed to begin. And that impressed me.

### **1924 and After.**

**Draper:** *Well, now, when you came out of prison in 1924, you must have found a tremendously changed situation in the whole party, as you remembered it.*

**Katterfeld:** Yes. I became the Daily Worker agent for New York.

**Draper:** *At that time, in '24, the big fight in the party was between Ruthenberg and Foster, or between one faction led by Ruthenberg and another faction led by Foster.*

**Katterfeld:** What the issue was there, I don't remember.

**Draper:** *Well, it was mostly about the Farmer-Labor issue — that was the chief issue, because there had been a fiasco with the Farmer-Labor political movement*

in 1924, and the Communists came off very badly in the end. And finally a tremendous factional struggle took place between Ruthenberg and Foster. In any case, for some reason you were shunted out of the leadership...in which you had played a considerable part before. Was that because of your own inclination, or because time had passed and somehow you didn't fit in?

**Katterfeld:** I think rather it was the latter. And then when you're out of circulation for a year, you lose track of things. It's so hard to catch up. And then I was very busy on the job that I had. As usual when I have some job, I work on it night and day. And when the paper was brought to New York, as I always had favored, and that vacancy stopped, I think that's when I started this Evolution journal.

**Draper:** \* \* \* When the paper was brought to New York, you left the paper?

**Katterfeld:** Yes.

**Draper:** \* \* \* And once you started the paper you devoted all your time to it? In effect, you went out of the party — political activity?

**Katterfeld:** I first made a trip through the country — all around — circle. I started out in the spring, early, and came back to New York late in the fall. And then started the paper.

**Draper:** Who was it that took the initiative — how did it happen that you got into a dispute with the party over the magazine?

**Katterfeld:** Oh, that came later. In fact, I sort of dropped out. I missed some of the group meetings and then I was so busy on this thing that I didn't go at all for a while. So there would have been a group around to bring me up on charges for non-attendance and non-activity. But that wasn't done. The thing had come up several times and they called me up to a meeting to see what to do about it. And who was there? Bittelman. And he thought that there should be some sort of a united front worked out. And at that meeting the question then came up — what constitutes a united front? And they never got to a conclusion about it. And then I was told they would call me up again. They never did. The next communication I had was the one from Lovestone notifying me that at the previous meeting they had voted that I should be expelled.

**Draper:** This was in '26?

**Katterfeld:** No, that was the beginning of '29 already.

**Draper:** And from then on your contact with the Communist movement...

**Katterfeld:** From then on it was zero. It made me so mad, I've never answered it. And actually, they must have been right because if they hadn't been right I would have answered and cared about it. But I didn't.

**Draper:** How long did you publish the magazine?

**Katterfeld:** Oh, off and on for 8 or 9 years, I think it was. It came out irregularly for a while. I'd go around and raise some money and then I'd get out another issue. I had enough pledges to carry it until the depression came on, and then these people that made the pledges were hard up themselves. And then, I didn't have good sense, I should have stopped, but I never could raise the money anyway to continue.

**Draper:** Did you ever go back into the Socialist Party?

**Katterfeld:** No. Somehow, I'm friendly with all the parties now. I'm not excited about any one of them. I wish them all good luck, including the Communist Party.

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### Back to Bridgman 1922.

**Draper:** Well, then, here you can read this section of how the whole thing [the 1922 Bridgman Convention] was done.

**Katterfeld:** Yes, that I'm much interested in because I've always wondered whether I was at fault in the way I arranged it and then I studied the whole matter, and I said to myself: If I had to do it over again, I would do it the same way. So this in a way makes me feel a little more confident. Quite a romantic setting there at Bridgman for the convention.

**Draper:** Does it all bring back the thing to mind?

**Katterfeld:** Oh, yes.

**Draper:** Most of that material comes from the trial at St. Joseph [MI], the record of which I studied, and Morrow told exactly how he worked.

**Katterfeld:** The trial? What trial?

**Draper:** Well, there were two trials at St. Joseph — one of Foster and one of Ruthenberg.

**Katterfeld:** Oh, those, yes.

**Draper:** ...the following year [1923].

**Katterfeld:** If they had obeyed orders, as I did, there probably wouldn't have been any. But they were

going to prove that this was all unnecessary.

**Draper:** Well, whose fault do you think it was, as you look back at it, when you say “they”?

**Katterfeld:** Well, I don’t think it was anybody’s fault especially, because no matter where we had put the convention the same person would have got through to it.

**Draper:** Do you remember this fellow, Morrow?

**Katterfeld:** No. I remember that afterwards we studied all the people and — I didn’t know all of them personally, but I knew most of them — and we suspected that it was one from the Philadelphia group — and by eliminating all the others, so we were very nearly right, too. But this postal blank — that was my scheme.

**Draper:** The what?

**Katterfeld:** Getting the Post Office money order blank as out key. Before that, they’d always used books and pamphlets and so on. And I thought it might be difficult for anyone to explain why he carried that particular thing, and it would show wear and tear, and if he lost it he’d be up against it to find another one. And I tried to think of something that, if a person lost it, no matter where he was, he could easily get another, and that no matter where he was found with it in his possession, it wouldn’t arouse any suspicion. So I thought of the money-order blank.

\* \* \*

**Katterfeld:** They couldn’t even find it [the Bridgman convention] even after they were there — that’s funny. I think a blind man would have run into it. Well, anyway, we heard that they were looking and we skedaddled. And that’s where Ruthenberg should have been called up on the carpet because the instruction was that he and the members of the [Central Executive] Committee should get out first, and he deliberately violated it. It looks like playing cops and robbers and so on, but at the time it seemed a very serious matter.

**Draper:** Of course.

**Katterfeld:** Now, it looks a little bit like play-acting.

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### The Socialist Labor Party.

**Katterfeld:** It has nothing to do with all this [something Draper had written]. It’s just how I got

my personal attitude towards the SLP — very friendly instead of hostile as most of the Socialist Party. I was selling stereoscopic views in Douglas, Arizona. That was 1907, I think, and an SLP organizer came to town and hunted me up. I was the only subscriber for *The People* in southern Arizona. So here he thought he would have help. He finally discovered me attending a street meeting with a Socialist soapbox speaker. That is I took him to the meeting — he’d met me during the evening — and I took him there naturally to listen to what the man had to say and ask whatever questions he wanted. So he came, and luckily the speaker was from the Left Wing and answered the questions in a way to please the guy. His name was... — he later was a candidate for President on the SLP ticket. But at that time he was merely an organizer. And I took him home to sleep with me. I had a room there in town. He slept with me for three nights, that is, he stayed in bed with me for three nights. Most of the nights were spent arguing, and most every argument that the SLP had against the Socialist Party, he met. And I was without an answer. But if he had convinced me I would have become a member of the SLP. He never did convince me but his final [argument] was that we were preparing the workers for the blood bath, and only the SLP knew how to organize them so as to prevent it. And I never could see how they could prevent it any more than we could. And that was his industrial union plan.... I was 100% convinced of his sincerity and his good intentions and all. So any place — I found most of the SLP members that way.

**Draper:** Did you ever meet DeLeon?

**Katterfeld:** No.

**Draper:** Did you ever hear him speak?

**Katterfeld:** No. But I admired him very much because of his writing, except that he seemed to have a strictly one track mind, and I understand he was very dogmatic and dictatorial in his personal actions, too, so that if I had met him I probably would have big arguments with him. But, from that time on I knew the SLP position well enough so that none of the hecklers that always attended Socialist meetings would ever bother me or stump me. Without compromising the SP position, I showed that I understood theirs.

**Louis C. Fraina.**

**Draper:** I told you that people like Fraina had started in the SLP as disciples of DeLeon, and you mentioned yesterday what a mystery the whole Fraina story became for you. Did you hear anything about what Fraina's troubles were?

**Katterfeld:** Well, one trouble — I don't know any of the facts about it but they asked me about it over there [in Moscow]. It appears that he received \$5,000 of Comintern funds and there had been no report about it or anything. And we knew nothing so I couldn't enlighten them at all. But I've often wondered.

**Draper:** Who asked you? Do you recall how the subject came up?

**Katterfeld:** I don't remember who it was about this matter. Lenin asked about Fraina, too — what we knew about him and so on. I knew nothing except that he'd been active in the early days there and had ceased being active.

\* \* \*

**C.E. Ruthenberg.**

**Draper:** What was your reaction to Ruthenberg in those days? Do you have anything?

**Katterfeld:** It was also mixed... In the early days, in the Socialist Party, I admired him very much. I thought he was a very competent organizer there in Cleveland, very good speaker, and so on. But when he took the position that he did in the split, and accepted the office [Executive Secretary of the CPA], I had the feeling that it was not because he was convinced that they [the CPA] were ideologically in a better position than we [the CLP], but because there was that position open and in the other side it wasn't. And from then on I never felt quite the same towards him. Maybe I shouldn't say that. I think I said to you I wouldn't get even with anybody and I've got to watch my step.

**Draper:** No, it's understandable.

**Katterfeld:** I thought this — a man of real integrity all the way through would have stood with us [the CLP], regardless. And of course, he found out his mistake and came away with us then, later. But by that time the damage had been done. Without him, they would have been helpless, just a group of foreign federation people. Of course they had the Michigan group with them at the convention, but they left them the minute they got home. Keracher — well, he had to go his own way.

**John Keracher  
and Dennis Batt.**

**Draper:** Was he the one who owned the shoe store?

**Katterfeld:** Yes.

**Draper:** He was a rather well to do man.

**Katterfeld:** That was my impression, I don't know for sure. But their [the Proletarian Party] specialty was study groups, and as a part of a political movement they would have been very valuable people. But study groups merely for the same of study groups by themselves don't have very important function.

**Draper:** Did you know Batt also?

**Katterfeld:** Yes.

**Draper:** What was he by profession?

**Katterfeld:** I don't remember that. Batt and Bittelman, they had a big debate in their own convention [1st CPA: Sept. 1-7, 1919]. I was over there for one meeting. We went over as a committee [from the CLP]. Bittelman was a master at quoting and so was Batt. And Bittelman understood what he was quoting much better than Batt did. Batt could tell the paragraph, the page, the line even, where so and so said this and that. But what I'm sure of, so and so who wrote that didn't mean by it exactly what Batt understood by it. And he proved it later by running for office on the Republican ticket in Detroit....

\* \* \*

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

*Photo of L.E. Katterfeld in Moscow, 1922, from the Davenport collection.*

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