
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by Anna Damon:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson

and Ann Rivington, 1940

Handwritten notes in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Box 9, Folder 2, Microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I knew of him in 1919. I was the first District Organizer in Massachusetts when the Party was legal. When I lived in Boston I remember taking a walk with him in Commons. We talked about the problems of our work. He liked to talk to people and wasn't satisfied with just official reports.¹

At the end of 1923 I came to Chicago. I lived and worked there.

As for the type of man he was — C.E. Ruthenberg was most methodical, efficient without being harsh, an extremely capable individual. He was a modest man, typified by the way he consulted others about articles that he wrote, asking opinions of those he knew.

He would help workers in the office. A young lady made a mistake in bookkeeping and couldn't find an error of one dollar. He searched for hours — and found it.

In the factional days, he ran the office in such a way to give the opposition a chance. In one case, Jack Jackstone, who did trade union work, had dictaphones in the office.² Most of the girls in the office were from C.E.'s faction and Jack's records kept piling up untranscribed. C.E. swore that he would fire all his adherents if that happened again, he wouldn't let them work that way. They had to be fair.

¹ According to the testimony of S.D. Levine in a 1940 interview with Oakley Johnson, Anna Damon — the common-law wife of Ruthenberg at the time of his death — took her surname from Ruthenberg's underground pseudonym, "David Damon." C.E.R. Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Box 9, Folder 4, Microfilm reel 5.

² Jack Johnstone (1881-1942) was a chief lieutenant of William Z. Foster, leader of the Chicago-based opposition faction.

He was a very good organizer and the office ran smoothly. It was a well organized, efficient office. He could never pass a stationery store on the street without lurking in the window. But he was not a machine-like person. He worked at home and had a typewriter there. He carried heavy packages home without feeling it at all.

He had ideas, a perspective about the organization. C.E. wrote poetry, too, and short stories, and had a sense of humor. He showed me some of his short stories, but I wouldn't look at them. I paid no attention to anyone's literary aspirations.

He liked music very much. When things went very bad, you could find him at a symphony concert.

I remember after a meeting once we took a walk in the park, and he spoke about the moon and the beauty of the night. I said, "Put that in your speech" — and he did. He did value the beauty of life, and from there he worked up to the class struggle.

One time there was terrific controversy in the Political Bureau. I was in Boston. He wrote me in a letter that the fight was so dirty that he had to go out and buy a new bath brush.

He was considered very stiff and correct but was a very fine human being. You'd have a hard time getting close to him. But when you did, there was the finest man! He said he built a fence around him to protect himself. He had a fear of being hurt and being exploited by people.

He did half my work for me, writing up my secretarial notes. I was always busier than he — he did my work for me on Sunday. Sunday I had so many meetings.

He liked the country very much. Whenever he had a chance, he went out to Bridgman.³ A French woman ran the place, she called her son, and used to make hot brioches for breakfast. She had a summer place, a sort of farm house.

He liked to go for walks — he could walk for hours and hours. Every Saturday night he'd leave the office and take the streetcar and go out to a cemetery and start to walk. It was the only place in Chicago to go away to the county. I used to joke about the cemetery — the sign said "No hunting" and "Gates close at 6 o'clock." Often he'd walk alone, when I wasn't there, and he'd walk much more and just pick wild flowers and put them in a vase.

³ Bridgman, Michigan, site of two secret conventions of the underground Communist Party, is only approximately 85 miles outside of Chicago.

I never saw him angry. He never lost control of himself. Even if he was angry, he had such control that one would not have noticed. I know I would have murdered those people during the factional fights. No one could influence him to do something that was not right for the Party. He was just not a factionalist. This accounts for the anger of Gitlow against him. He and others had no influence over him.

He had a very limited amount of money and kept a very close account of his expenses — even 2 cents for a paper — to submit to the Committee. He was not at all stingy, but extremely economical. I don't remember his ever taking a taxi to a train station. He would plan the time and take a streetcar, or walk. If he took a taxi, it was something unusual. He planned his day the way he planned his time.

He remembered birthdays and Xmas and all such anniversaries of his friends. He loved to give expensive presents. Tareyton Cigarettes were called "C.E.'s Cigarettes" and everybody smoked them. They used to be 25 cents. On one occasion he didn't smoke for two months and used the money save money for a bag — \$22.00. Everything was planned. I don't think he ever borrowed a penny from anyone in all his life. He also held to the same policy for the Party — he held them down on spending.

He was very strict about the hours of work of others. I used to be surprised at his patience in listening for 2 or 3 hours to men from out of town. He told me, "I only listen for the first half hour, then let them talk," and thought about their problems or others.

He never tasted butter, cheese, or cream. He was a teetotaler, never drank. He had the ability to relax. Going out in the evening was an event. He'd wash, perhaps put on a clean shirt. C.E. wore white shirts only, and many followed him in this. He wore conservative ties and an Oxford grey suit. He was a very handsome man — very distinguished looking.

C.E. used to like to read detective stories. One night he happened to wake up about 4 am and I found him in an overcoat in the kitchen reading a detective story.

He was a very strong man, very healthy, and he never paid much attention to his physical well-being. He never gave in about his illness. He had a bad appendix. He had an attack of appendicitis once when on a tour and was pretty sick then.

His attack came on Saturday afternoon [Feb. 26, 1927]. I went out to the *Daily Worker* and came back around 2:00 am — he was never very ill. About 4:00 I said, "Let's call the Doctor."

He said, “Let’s wait till 6:00 — I’ll be be light then.”

He had a ruptured appendix. He couldn’t believe he would be sick.

When he was in the hospital, in the last hours before he died, they gave him a salt injection to revive him — and he just waved his arm, several times, as if to encourage everyone. He asked me to take care of the bank accounts and so on, and had the same calm as in life.

He was ready, politically, at all times to bring about peace.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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