

THE ROMANCE
OF AMERICAN
COMMUNISM

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CHAPTER ONE

To Begin With

BEFORE I KNEW that I was Jewish or a girl I knew that I was a member of the working class. At a time when I had not yet grasped the significance of the fact that in my house English was a second language, or that I wore dresses while my brother wore pants, I knew—and I knew it was important to know—that Papa worked hard all day long. One of my strongest memories of early childhood is that no matter what we were doing, my mother and I, everything in our Bronx apartment stopped dead at four-thirty in the afternoon and she began cooking supper. If ever I questioned this practice, or complained, or demanded that we continue what we were doing, my mother—whose manner was generally frantic and uncontrolled—would answer with a sudden dignity that stopped me cold: “Papa works hard all day long. When he comes home his supper must be on the table.”

Papa works hard all day long. Those words, in my mother’s mouth, spoke volumes, and from the age of reason on I absorbed their complex message. The words stirred in me, almost from the

first time I heard them, an extraordinary resonance, one whose range was wide enough to compel my emotional attention throughout my subsequent life. To begin with, the words communicated pain and difficulty; my childish heart ached for my gentle father. The pain was frightening, and even as it began to flow inside me, like a liquid turning to a solid, I felt myself go numb. This emotion was awesome; it induced in me the sense of some mysterious force working on our lives, some force in which we were all caught: suspended, puzzled, moving blind. At the very same time, the mere articulation of the words in my mother's mouth produced a peculiar and relieving focus against the murkiness of that mysterious force, a focus which told me where and who I was: I was the daughter of Papa who worked hard all day long. Finally, the words said: We are all of us, here in this house, vitally connected to the fact that Papa works hard all day long. We pay attention to and respect that fact; we make common cause with it. This last, this oneness, this solidarity, produced in me pride and excitement; it dissolved the numbness and transformed the pain back into a moving, stirring, agitating element: something to be understood and responded to, something to be dealt with and struggled against.

My father stood upright on the floor of a dress factory on West 35th Street in New York City with a steam iron in his hand for thirty years. My uncles owned the factory. My father was Labor, my uncles were Capital. My father was a Socialist, my uncles were Zionists. Therefore, Labor was Socialism and Capital was Nationalism. These equations were mother's milk to me, absorbed through flesh and bone almost before consciousness. Concomitantly, I knew also—and again, as though osmotically—who in this world were friends, who enemies, who neutrals. Friends were all those who thought like us: working-class socialists, the people whom my parents called “progressives.” All others were “them”; and “them” were either engaged enemies like my uncles or passive neutrals like some of our neighbors. Years later, the “us” and “them” of my life would become Jews and Gentiles, and still later women and men, but for all of my growing-up

years “us” and “them” were socialists and non-socialists; the “politically enlightened” and the politically *unenlightened*; those who were “struggling for a better world” and those who, like moral slugs, moved blind and unresponsive through this vast inequity that was our life under capitalism. Those, in short, who had class consciousness and those *lumpen* or bourgeois who did not.

This world of “us” was, of course, a many-layered one. I was thirteen or fourteen years old before I consciously understood the complex sociology of the progressive planet; understood that at the center of the globe stood those who were full-time organizing members of the Communist Party, at the outermost periphery stood those who were called “sympathizers,” and at various points in between stood those who held Communist Party membership cards and those who were called “fellow travelers.” In those early childhood years these distinctions did not exist for me; much less did I grasp that within this sociology my parents were merely “fellow travelers.” The people who came to our house with the *Daily Worker* or the Yiddish newspaper *Der Freiheit* under their arms, the people at the “affairs” we attended, the people at the *shule* (the Yiddish school I was sent to after my public-school day was over), the people at the rallies we went to and the May Day parades we marched in, the people who belonged to the various “clubs” and were interminably collecting money for the latest cause or defense fund—they were all as one to me; they were simply “our people.” Of a Saturday morning, the doorbell in our Bronx apartment would ring, my father would open the door, and standing there would be Hymie, a cutter in my father’s shop, a small, thin man with gnarled hands and the face of an anxious bulldog. “*Nu, Louie?*” Hymie would say to my father. “Did you see the papers this morning? Did you see—a black year on all of them!—what they’re saying about the Soviet Union *this* morning?” “Come in, Hymie, come in,” my father would reply. “Have a cup of coffee, we’ll discuss it.” I did not know that there was a difference between Hymie, who was also only a “fellow traveler,” and my cousins David and Selena, who were YCLers, or my uncle Sam, who was always off at “a meeting,” or Bennie Grossman from across the street who had suddenly disappeared from the neighborhood (“unavailable” was the word for what Bennie had become, but it would be twenty years before I real-

ized that was the word). It was, to begin with, all one country to me, one world, and the major characteristic of that world as I perceived it was this:

At the wooden table in our kitchen there were always gathered men named Max and Hymie, and women named Masha and Goldie. Their hands were work-blackened, their eyes intelligent and anxious, their voices loud and insistent. They drank tea, ate black bread and herring, and talked "issues." Endlessly, they talked issues. I sat on the kitchen bench beside my father, nestled in the crook of his arm, and I listened, wide-eyed, to the talk. Oh, that talk! That passionate, transforming talk! I understood nothing of what they were saying, but I was excited beyond words by the richness of their rhetoric, the intensity of their arguments, the urgency and longing behind that hot river of words that came ceaselessly pouring out of all of them. Something important was happening here, I always felt, something that had to do with understanding things. And "to understand things," I already knew, was the most exciting, the most important thing in life.

It was characteristic of that world that during those hours at the kitchen table with my father and his socialist friends I didn't know we were poor. I didn't know that in those places beyond the streets of my neighborhood we were without power, position, material or social existence. I only knew that tea and black bread were the most delicious food and drink in the world, that political talk filled the room with a terrible excitement and a richness of expectation, that here in the kitchen I felt the same electric thrill I felt when Rouben, my Yiddish teacher, pressed my upper arm between two bony fingers and, his eyes shining behind thick glasses, said to me: "Ideas, dolly, ideas. Without them, life is nothing. With them, life is *everything*."

Sometimes I would slip off the bench and catch my mother somewhere between the stove and the table (she was forever bringing something to the table). I would point to one or another at the table and whisper to her: Who is this one? Who is that one? My mother would reply in Yiddish: "He is a writer. She is a poet. He is a thinker." Oh, I would nod, perfectly satisfied with these identifications, and return to my place on the bench. *He*, of course, drove a bakery truck. *She* was a sewing-machine opera-

tor. That other one over there was a plumber, and the one next to him stood pressing dresses all day long beside my father.

But Rouben was right. Ideas were everything. So powerful was the life inside their minds that sitting there, drinking tea and talking issues, these people ceased to be what they objectively were—immigrant Jews, disenfranchised workers—and, indeed, they became thinkers, writers, poets.

Every one of them read the *Daily Worker*, the *Freiheit*, and the *New York Times* religiously each morning. Every one of them had an opinion on everything he or she read. Every one of them was forever pushing, pulling, yanking, mauling those opinions into shape within the framework of a single question. The question was: Is it good for the workers? That river of words was continually flowing toward an ocean called *farshtand*, within whose elusive depths lay the answer to this question.

They were voyagers on that river, these plumbers, pressers, and sewing-machine operators. Disciplined voyagers with a course to steer, a destination to arrive at. When one of them yelled at another (as one of them regularly did) “Id-yot! What has *that* to do with anything? Use your brains! God gave you brains, yes or no? Well, use them!” he was, in effect, saying: Where will that question take us? Nowhere. Get back on course. We’re going somewhere, aren’t we? Well, then, let’s go there.

They took with them on this journey not only their own narrow, impoverished experience but a set of abstractions as well, abstractions with the power to transform. When these people sat down at the kitchen table to talk, Politics sat down with them, Ideas sat down with them, above all, History sat down with them. They spoke and thought within a context that had world-making properties. This context lifted them out of the nameless, faceless obscurity of the soul into which they had been born and gave them, for the first time in their lives, a sense of rights as well as of obligations. They had rights because they now knew who and what they were. They were not simply the disinherited of the earth, they were proletarians. They were not a people without a history, they had the Russian Revolution. They were not without a civilizing world view, they had Marxism.

Within such a context the people at my father’s kitchen table

could place themselves; and if they could place themselves—compelling insight!—they could *become* themselves. For, in order to become one must first have some civilizing referent, some social boundary, some idea of nationhood. These people had no external nationhood; nothing in the cultures they had left, or the one to which they had come, had given them anything but a humiliating sense of outsidership. The only nationhood to which they had attained was the nationhood inside their minds: the nationhood of the international working class. And indeed, a nation it was—complete with a sense of family, culture, religion, social mores, political institutions. The people in that kitchen had remade the family in the image of workers all over the world, political institutions in the image of the Communist Party, social mores in the image of Marxist allegiance, religion in the image of the new socialized man, Utopia in the image of the Soviet Union. They sat at the kitchen table and they felt themselves linked up to America, Russia, Europe, the world. Their people were everywhere, their power was the revolution around the corner, their empire “a better world.”

To see themselves as part of an identifiable mass of human beings with a place and a destiny in the scheme of civilized life—when until now they had felt only the dread isolation that is the inevitable legacy of powerlessness—was suddenly to “see” themselves. Thus, paradoxically, the more each one identified himself or herself with the working-class movement, the more each one came individually alive. The more each one acknowledged his or her condition as one of binding connectedness, the more each one pushed back the darkness and experienced the life within. In this sense, that kitchen ceased to be a room in a shabby tenement apartment in the Bronx and became, for all intents and purposes, the center of the world as that center has ever been described since the time of the ancient Greeks. For, here in the turmoil and excitement of their urgent talk, the men and women at the kitchen table were involved in nothing less than an act of self-creation: the creation of the self through increased consciousness. The instrument of consciousness for them was Marx. Marx and the Communist Party and world socialism. Marx was their Socrates, the Party was their Plato, world socialism their Athens.

There are few things in life to equal the power and joy of

experiencing oneself. Rousseau said there is nothing in life *but* the experiencing of oneself. Gorky said he loved his friends because in their presence he felt himself. "How important it is," he wrote, "how glorious it is—to feel oneself!" Indeed, how impossible it is not to love ardently those people, that atmosphere, those events and ideas in whose presence one feels the life within oneself stirring. How impossible, in fact, not to feel passionately in the presence of such stirrings. For the people among whom I grew this intensity of feeling was transmitted through Marxism as interpreted by the Communist Party.

At the indisputable center of the progressive world stood the Communist Party. It was the Party whose awesome structure harnessed that inchoate emotion which, with the force of a tidal wave, drove millions of people around the globe toward Marxism. It was the Party whose moral authority gave shape and substance to an abstraction, thereby making of it a powerful human experience. It was the Party that brought to astonishing life the kind of comradeship that makes swell in men and women the deepest sense of their own humanness, allowing them to love themselves through the act of loving each other. For, of this party it could rightly be said, as Richard Wright in his bitterest moment did, nonetheless, say: "There was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist Party."

Who, who came out of that world could fail to remember the extraordinary quality these experiences embodied for all those living through them? You were, if you were there, in the presence of one of the most amazing of humanizing processes: that process whereby one emerges by merging; whereby one experiences oneself through an idea of the self beyond the self and one becomes free, whole, and separate through the mysterious agency of a disciplining context. In short, you were in the presence of the socializing emotion, that emotion whose operating force is such that men and women feel themselves not through that which composes their own unique, individual selves but rather through that which composes the shared, irreducible self.

To all this the Communist Party spoke. From all this it drew its formidable strength.

I was twenty years old in April of 1956 when Khrushchev