



Brushes with History

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It was a mild early August evening when my son came back from the barn with a small box marked "1930s," which he placed on the kitchen table. "Look what I found!" I could hardly believe that after three weeks of work going through the family papers there was anything left to discover. He showed me an envelope marked "LDT" from which he extracted three letters from 1937 and 1938. Addressed to "My dear Comrades Dorothy and John McDonald," they were from none other than Leon Trotsky, writer, Russian revolutionary and *homme extraordinaire*.

Why didn't I know about these letters? My parents' trip in 1937 from New York City to Coyoacán, Mexico, was part of our family lore. Along with a number of American intellectuals, they had attended the American philosopher John Dewey's Commission of Inquiry into the charges made against Trotsky in the Moscow Trials. They went as volunteers committed to civil liberties to help Trotsky prepare the presentation of his case before the Commission. My father often laughed recounting his job running the mimeograph machine. I knew that my mother, Dorothy Eisner, had painted two portraits of Trotsky, as well as one of the entire Commission, which included Dewey, Trotsky, and the celebrated Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. The hearings took place in the house of Frida Kahlo. About Frida, an astonishing beauty, my father used to say: "she was always just standing there in that long skirt of hers." But neither of my parents had ever mentioned any letters.

In the 1980s my father had moved all of his and my late mother's books and papers into our large barn in northern Vermont when he could no longer keep them in his New York apartment. They say that in every family there is a designated archivist, and my father had played that role in ours once he retired as a staff writer and editor for *Fortune* magazine. After he died in 1988, I became his successor. I thought it would be years before I even looked at what was in the more than 200 boxes of manuscripts, papers, and books. But when someone got interested in my father's fishing papers the summer after his death, and upset me by saying that if he acquired them he would put them on the market, I thought his correspondence, along with the notes and papers for his books, should be kept together and preserved. So I found myself readying the archive for delivery to the Beinecke Library at Yale University.



Leon Trotsky and his wife, Natalia, Coyoacán, Mexico, 1937. Photo courtesy of the author, private collection.

My father had many intense interests—from business and game theory, to fishing, horse racing, poker, and politics—and he had written about almost all of them in articles or books. But he never published anything about the experience in Coyoacán. He had written extensive letters, however, about the political climate in New York on the anti-Stalinist left and about the Mexican trip, specifically, to Alan Wald when Wald was writing *The New York Intellectuals*, all of which I found in the 1930s box.

My mother was born, like my father, in 1906, and had known that she wanted to be an artist from the age of thirteen. She studied at the Art Students League in New York from 1925–29 with Boardman Robinson, Kenneth Hayes Miller, and Thomas Hart Benton, and by the 1930s she was exhibiting frequently and was an active participant in the New York art community. She was always said to be the non-political member of the family, but I think it is clear that she participated in politics through her art in several ways.

She became a founding member of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors when they split with the American Artists' Congress. The AAC, whose mission was to alleviate the economic suffering of artists during the depression and to oppose the fascist censorship of art, had been founded in 1936. It supported the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) and protested the Olympic Games of 1936 in Berlin



Frida Kahlo,
Coyoacán, Mexico,
1937. Photo courtesy
of the author, private
collection.

through a boycott of exhibitions. But when members of the AAC decided to endorse the Russian invasion of Finland, implicitly defending Hitler's position, a group of artists signed a statement opposed to this policy. Along with Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and others, my mother and her sister (Anne Eisner) helped to found the Federation for Modern Painters and Sculptors. And then, of course, there were the portraits of Trotsky and the Commission.

It was with all this in mind that I had turned to the task of archiving my parents' papers. But surprises, as I had already learned, await in family archives. It was only the very last night—the 1300 pounds of materials were scheduled to be shipped to the Beinecke the next day—that we found some of the most arresting items. And what had been a matter of anecdote and hearsay was all laid out in the form of letters and photographs on the kitchen table.

The Dewey Commission inquiry was a response to the trumped-up trials engineered by Stalin against leaders of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Trotsky, who had been charged with treason and had been living in exile in Turkey, France, and Norway, arrived in Mexico and sought a public investigation of the charges Stalin had brought against him. Many of the

radical anti-Stalinists in New York were American liberals (some of whom became conservatives later in life) who were against Hitler and fascism but interested in the Russian social experiment.

At the time, my father was an aspiring writer who disliked organizations and etiquettes. Not a Trotskyite, he allied himself with Dewey's mission to allow Trotsky his day in the court of public opinion. As young technical staffers, he and others worked closely with Trotsky, often late into the night. "One of my chores," he wrote, "was to bring Trotsky one of his favorite foods, yogurt, from Mexico City when I went out to Coyoacán each day, and to avoid the possibility of a Stalinist agent poisoning his yogurt, I used to randomize the stores I went to."

My mother soon found herself taken into Trotsky's confidence and painted him daily in his study, surrounded by the intensive activities of the inquiry. Black humor kept fear of Trotsky's assassination at a distance (for a time). One day, as my mother scraped his hand off the canvas in painterly frustration, Trotsky quipped, "a writer can work without a head but he must have his hand." Trotsky's security was a constant preoccupation for those around him (he was assassinated in his study in 1940). But my father was so inept at holding a gun that he had to give up the idea of protecting anyone.

What struck me looking at the photographs is how they catch the intense idealism of these people, among them, Herbert Solow, my father's close friend and one of the organizers, avidly engaging the great revolutionary theorist with their ideas for social change. There is the rumpled but formal Dewey, seventy-four and revered head of the Commission, bearing the weight of his judicial duty; the mysterious Frida, who stares soberly at the camera. I see my mother laughing with Trotsky, standing with the portrait, now missing, that she had just finished of him. "The Old Man," as they called him affectionately, liked debate and treated them as intellectual peers; he was, my father wrote in a letter to Alan Wald, "Mr. History without a mirror-image problem." Their admiration for him as a thinker knew no limits.

When the Commission finished its work (later published as *The Case of Leon Trotsky and Not Guilty*), my parents returned from Mexico, without jobs or money, and retreated to a shack in the Catskills. There, they ate "berries and trout," as they wrote to Trotsky, and dreamed of taking him fishing. My father wrote, "Your portrait is finished! . . . [but] as far as we are concerned . . . the Mexican hearings have not yet been concluded. They are going on upstairs here in another painting . . . You have a lot of lecture-fire and may be thundering Not for No . . ." My mother completed the paintings, and sent photographs back to Coyoacán. She also wrote to Trotsky, continuing their gallows humor, about "the exciting days I spent putting your head on and taking it off a thousand times—decapitating you—as you used to



Dorothy Eisner,
Leon Trotsky, and
John McDonald,
Coyoacán, Mexico,
1937. Photo courtesy
of the author, private
collection.

Albert Glotzer,
Frida Kahlo, and
John McDonald,
Coyoacán, Mexico,
1937. Photo courtesy
of the author, private
collection.



say." Trotsky, who had written about the importance of freedom in art, remembered "with pleasure the hours when Comrade Dorothy worked in my room," and relayed Rivera's praise for the portrait. Rivera himself appears in the painting she did of the Commission, sketching one of the other members.

It wasn't until I found these papers that I really understood how the climate of fear had rippled out from the thirties in Mexico, through the McCarthy era of the 1950s and beyond. My parents were afraid that someone might take and destroy the portrait of Trotsky, and so my mother brought it back from her studio on Cornelia Street. My sister remembers often thinking "there's Trotsky in the closet" in the apartment on Morton Street in which I grew up.

This would have been the first portrait painted in Trotsky's study. My mother had given the second to the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, which in turn gave it to Margaret De Silver in recognition of her generosity in supporting the Dewey Commission in Coyoacán. De Silver, who had been married to one of the founders of the ACLU, ran a salon in New York where much passionate political conversation took place. After her death, my parents lost track of the portrait and it wasn't until the mid-1980s, when my father was visiting Isabelle and Jim Storey in Boston, that he rediscovered it at Harvard's Houghton Library. Isabelle remembers how they were getting a tour that ended up at the Trotsky papers in the stacks. "I discovered a painting at the very end of the aisle. I walked over to it and recognized Dot's style right away and asked John to come and look at it. John was very surprised to see the painting there. He thought the painting had been lost all these years." The whereabouts of the other is still a mystery.

So much documentary history goes missing, but some is fortuitously rediscovered. Much has now been written about Trotsky and Dewey's Commission, but one gets a uniquely intimate glimpse into the events in Coyoacán through these private letters and photographs: a youthful brush with a world-historical figure. The intensity of these exchanges, with their intellectual commitment and creativity, made these young people believe that individuals could, in a measure however small, change the world in which they live. It confirmed a belief that freedom of speech and freedom of art, along with equity and justice, could make life more meaningful and the world a better place.

At a party back in New York after the inquiry, the paintings of Trotsky and the Commission were shown, and members gave Dewey the gavel he used in Coyoacán on which was engraved.



Leon Trotsky and Dorothy Eisner in front of a portrait of him by her, Coyoacán, Mexico, 1937. Photo courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

THE TRUTH IS ON THE MARCH
EMILE ZOLA 1897
JOHN DEWEY 1937
FROM THOSE WHO MARCHED ALONG

We find ourselves in a period since 9/11 which, while historically removed from the issues of the thirties, has nevertheless begun to resemble the 1950s in its fear, suspicion, and encroachment on individual rights. As we live through times of deep insecurity in a world impatient with complexity and often disdainful of intellectuals and the arts, I would like to think that some of the values represented by the Dewey Commission will endure. Creating this archive, delving into a history that was, yes, personal, but also social and political, gave me the sense that I had contributed in some small measure to the history of that hope.

NOTES:

Works cited in this essay include: Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (University of North Carolina Press, 1987), and *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials*, originally published by Harper in 1938 and reprinted by Pathfinder Press in 1972. John Dewey, *The Case of Leon Trotsky: Report of Hearings on the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials*, was originally published by Harper in 1937. A second edition, published by Pathfinder Press in 1969, will be reprinted in 2006. Dorothy Eisner's painting of the Dewey Commission now hangs in the front hall of the Dewey Center at the University of Southern Illinois in Carbondale. Her painting of Leon Trotsky will be on exhibit at Houghton Library of the Harvard College Library during June and July, 2006, along with photographs and papers.