

Max Kevrik

by Sergei Ovsianikov

Mordko Itskovich Kevrik (pseudonyms: Max Kevrik, Max Altenberg, Avenarius, Max Saratovsky, Moritz) (c. 1891, village of Shumovo, Lomzhinsky district, Lomzhinskaya province — April 18, 1926, Warsaw). From a petty bourgeois family. Member of the Warsaw group of anarcho-communists. On November 20, 1908, a police search of his apartment discovered instructions for making bombs and a manuscript with revolutionary content. Kevrik himself was declared wanted.

On August 15, 1914, he was arrested in Sokółka, Grodnenskaya province. On August 27, 1914, he was transferred to Warsaw. “Due to military circumstances,” he was evacuated to the Saratov provincial prison. On September 27, 1916, a Saratov tribunal acquitted him for insufficient evidence. He was released from prison on October 31, 1916.

He became the organizer and leader of the Saratov Free Association of Anarchist Groups. From August, 1917, to May, 1918, he edited the newspaper *The Voice of Anarchy*. During the summer of 1918, he took part in a conference of anarchists in Saratov, at which he proposed going underground in connection with the approaching invasion of White Guards.

On November 25, 1918, he took part in the All-Russian Conference of Anarcho-Syndicalists in Moscow. In January, 1920, he had a confrontation with Bolsheviks led by Ilya Vardin, organizer of the Saratov Provincial Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). Afterwards, Kevrik left Saratov.



Max Kevrik (police photo)

According to data of the Cheka, he was elected to the secretariat of the All-Russian Federation of Anarcho-Communists (VFAK). After the fall of Minsk in October, 1920 [to the Poles], he left Russia for underground work in Poland, carrying documents provided by the Revolutionary Military Committee (RVS) of the Western Front.

In the underground, Kevrik worked under the name Moritz; according to the Chekists, he compromised the efforts of the Communists. From 1924 he was the Warsaw correspondent of *Golos Truda* [Buenos Aires], and covered the court case of Nestor Makhno.

He collaborated with Alexander Berkman’s fund in support of Russian anarchists; in particular, he transferred money from the fund to the imprisoned

Max Chernyak. Kevrik was active in the syndicalist workers movement in Poland.

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Max Kevrik’s wife was **Vera Yevgenyevna Kevrik** (née Dukova) (1893 – ?). She was a worker who was active in the anarchist movement in Saratov, Moscow, and Smolensk. Arrested in September, 1922, in Smolensk, she was sentenced on February 23, 1923, to two years imprisonment, to be served in the “special purpose” camp on the Solovetsky Islands. On November 17, 1924, she was transferred to Kemlag [on the mainland nearby]. On March 5, 1925, she was sent to Ufa [in the Ural Mountains] for three years of exile. Her subsequent fate is unknown.

Addendum to Max Kevrik by Malcolm Archibald

In May, 1918, Nestor Makhno and many other Ukrainian anarchists arrived in the Volga city of Saratov, refugees forced out of their homeland by the invading German-Austrian armies. In Volume 2 of his memoirs, Makhno describes the conference referred to above and makes clear his antipathy towards Kevrik, whom he knew as Max Altenberg:

“... many of the comrades, including myself, quarrelled with Altenberg. . . . It was patently clear to

us that Altenberg and his comrades had accommodated themselves to the orientation of the [Regional Revolutionary Committee] after the crushing by the Bolsheviks of the Anarchist groups in Moscow and other cities. Altenberg . . . didn’t want the Anarchists from Ukraine who were gathering in the city to get involved in local politics. Sensing the undeniable correctness of this explanation, a number of comrades lashed out at Altenberg and with this the conference came to an end. On that very day many

of the comrades left for other regions of Russia.^[1]

Another writer who had a more favourable impression of Kevrik/Altenberg in Saratov was the Bolshevik Viktor Babushkin. His account is perhaps worth quoting at length because of the colourful picture, admittedly slanted, it gives of the anarchist milieu in Saratov:

A “party” of Anarchists openly existed in Saratov. We didn’t like them, but we put up with them for the time being since they had very little influence on the workers.

The leader of the Anarchists in Saratov was Max Kevrik. He and a handful of others were ideological Anarchists, quite well educated—Barabanov, Skortsov, and others—but the rest were nihilists, hooligans, or simply criminal riffraff.

When the Executive Committee moved its offices from the Governor’s Mansion to the Peasant Bank, we allotted a room on the third floor to the Anarchists.

Owing to my acquaintance with Barabanov, I was present at their meetings on several occasions—out of curiosity. These meetings were hilarious. The huge room was packed with people and it was as smoky as a foundry. Max Kevrik, standing behind a table, tried to bring the meeting to order: he rang a bell, banged on the table, and yelled, but no one paid any attention. The hubbub was like the bazaar.

Finally, having exhausted his patience, Kevrik pulled a large Colt out of his belt and fired at the ceiling. The noise of the shot, followed by a shower of plaster and dust, sufficed to induce some quiet.

“Comrades,” Kevrik yelled at the top of his lungs, “I bring to your attention the question of annihilating the bourgeoisie! . . .”

“To hell with your question!” interrupted a lout with a student cap. “I move that we requisition paper from the Bolsheviks for printing leaflets. The workers are demanding our literature!”

¹ Nestor I. Makhno, *Under the Blows of the Counterrevolution*, (Edmonton, 2009), p. 80.

“Comrades!” squeaked another who was dressed like a bandit. “We need to raise the workers against the Bolsheviks in a general strike!”

Cries and proposals were heard from all sides. A man dressed like a shop assistant introduced a motion to approve the agenda for the meeting, but his voice was drowned out by yelling and arguing.

Kevrik pounded on the table with his Colt and demanded quiet, but to no avail.

A pock-marked, bare-footed fellow in a yellow women’s jacket whistled furiously and beat on the bench where he was sitting with a piece of scrap metal.

This cacophony did not cease the entire duration of the meeting; it either quieted down slightly or again became like the roar of ocean waves.

I was overcome with laughter and, pulling Barabanov off to one side, yelled in his ear:

“Sashka! So this is anarchy—the mother of order! Let’s get out of here before there’s more shooting . . .”

Nevertheless, I forced myself to listen as Kevrik muddled along. Gritting his teeth, he proposed the wholesale annihilation of the city’s bourgeoisie.

Kevrik yelled, the meeting yelled, and I couldn’t figure out what had happened—had the resolution of the “leader” been adopted?

“We don’t vote,” Barabanov explained crossly. “Majorities or minorities don’t play a role in our

decision-making. Each person is their own leader and boss . . . Each person has the right to decide any question any way they want.”^[2]

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The Alexander Berkman archive at the International Institute for Social History includes seven letters written by Max Kevrik while he was living in Poland in 1924–1925; these are translated and annotated be-

² Viktor Babushkin, *Gor’kaya molodost’; Dni velikikh sobytiy* [Bitter youth; Days of great events], (Moscow, 1960), pp. 588–589.



Max Kevrik (police photo)

low. Kevrik was acting as Berkman's agent in Poland, helping Russian anarchists both inside and outside the Soviet Union, but poverty and illness made his life very difficult. Kevrik had contracted tuberculosis in a tsarist prison and was slowly dying. As was known to happen under similar circumstances, money sent to him by Berkman for specific purposes

was sometimes spent on personal needs, much to Kevrik's embarrassment. Kevrik died on April 18, 1926. Ironically, he received a nice write-up in *Delo Truda*, the journal co-edited by Makhno in Paris.^[3]

³ *Delo Truda* N° 12 (May, 1926.), p. 16. The obituary calls him by his Saratov alias "Max Altenberg."

Dear Friend Alexander!

Your letter of November 28 [1924] was received by me yesterday. I'm hurrying to answer you and let you know that I've received the 20 dollars. Concerning the questionnaires and the instructions that go with them, I'm trying to get this done as best I can.^[1] For what it's worth, I've got eight days to spend on this. I'll have to make trips to two places. The most difficult part for me is getting all the completed questionnaires notarized. But we'll see how things go.

Besides that I also need to enter into relations with

¹ Berkman needed these questionnaires filled out for his book **Letters from Russian Prisons** (London, 1925). In the event, he collected only 47 questionnaires, mostly from political refugees living in Germany.

Dear friend Alexander!

I've only just received your letter of March 21 [1925]. It's terrible that so often I have to excuse myself to you for not being punctual in corresponding. In fact I should have answered your previous letter long ago. Unfortunately I was not able to do so because I was arrested during a roundup of 160 members of my union. After a couple of days, all of us were released, but some of us had charges laid against us. Generally speaking, the situation in Poland now is characterized by the persecution of the trade union movement. Throughout this whole "democratic" country the offices of trade unions are being shuttered (under government seal) and denied the possibility of legal activity. Under such conditions, I had to clear my room of any documents. Then it became difficult to retrieve them. Generally speaking, during the last month and a half there have been many unpleasant situations to endure. These circumstances are responsible for my recent silence.

Concerning Chern[yak], here's what I think. If it were possible to provide a defense lawyer, then everything that you wrote about could be arranged. Without a

I.

the Relief Committee of the P. P. S. Party.^[2]

And I only just received news about where Chernyak is. Recently an eight-day hunger strike came to an end. Two of [the strikers] are in very bad shape.^[3]

Your Max.

Oh, I also have photographs from the Solovetsky Islands. Would they be useful to you? Write me.

December 3, 1924

² Polska Partia Socjalistyczna.

³ The anarchist Max Chernyak, like Kevrik a barber by trade, tried to make a foray into Soviet territory in July, 1924, with a group of accomplices but they were detained at the border by Polish authorities and had been languishing in prison in the town of Włodzimierz Wołyński. For more on Chernyak, see <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/tdz1q9>.

II.

defense lawyer, nothing is going to work out. But anyway I'm trying to pass on to him what you told me.

Concerning the questionnaires, unfortunately I had to send them back to you since not one of those who are here want to have anything to do with a notary as per your instructions.

Next I have a practical request for you. Henceforth, if you want to send any printed matter to this address, try to enclose it in a plain envelope. The envelope should not have the name of your committee printed on it. Also please write on plain paper, not letterhead.

I just received a letter from Vera. She has already been released and is in the city of Ufa. She's very sick. These torturers released her from the camp in a state of illness, as a consequence of which she was robbed on



Vera Kevrik

the way to Ufa, the worst of it being that her coat was stolen. In this exposed condition she arrived in Ufa and probably her health declined even further; she was even unable to finish her letter. There's no work there, and even if there was, her illness would prevent her from taking it on. She has no money. I wanted to send her a few dollars from the money that the union owes me, but unfortunately there's not a cent left in the union's treasury. And meanwhile she suffers there poverty-stricken. I implore you, if possible, to send her something to the address: Ufa, Vavilovskaya, No. 28

Yakimovoy, for Vera.

In addition, she says that A. Baron is in the city of Biysk, in the Altai.^[4]

Take care.

With best wishes,

Max

Warsaw, March 29, 1925

⁴ Aron Baron gives news about Vera in a letter from Biysk dated April 12, 1925. See <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/ns1t4b>.

III.

Dear friend Alexander!

I've only just received your postcard of May 6 [1925]. The great delay in receiving it was because I was absent from Warsaw for several days. I'm very, very sensitive to and conscious of the matter of our friends, but I assure you, dear friend, that the last six weeks have been so hard for me materially speaking, that more than once I have entertained the thought—it's embarrassing for me to speak about this to an old militant—about suicide. I remain completely without work and up to my neck in debt and with all this I'm not able to practice my trade. They don't give work any more to a barber if his hands are shaking; he's already screwed. A heavy burden falls on comrades or friends—this for me is worse than death. And there's no way out. Do you understand now why I sometimes don't answer you promptly?

Now to the essentials.

I recently spoke with the sister of one of the guys locked up with Chernyak about their case. She went to see the investigating officer in Kovel. He told her that there's no weighty evidence for drawing up an indictment and now the whole matter has been forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to receive accurate testimony from you, the Old Man [*Starik*], and N. I.^[5] I think that sooner or later the Polish Embassy in Berlin will invite you to give them evidence, so you should be ready for this. Why it is that Chernyak doesn't write to you, I can't explain. After my visit to Kovel, he also stopped writing to me.

I haven't received anything from Vera for a long time. I don't know what's going on with her.

Concerning the situation in Polish prisons, I have already started collecting relevant material. I'm hoping

⁵ Like Berkman, the "Old Man" (Vsevolod Voline) and "N. I." (Nestor Ivanovich Makhno) were living in Berlin at the time.

that I will soon be able to send you something on this issue.

Incidentally, I quite forgot that I need to send you five dollars that you forwarded to me for the previous project. I'll send this in a couple of days.

With Anya^[6] things are very bad: she is so sick that the prison administration even arranged for her to be given raw eggs and the doctors to prescribe medicine for her.

Take care. With best wishes,

Max

Warsaw, May 19, 1925.

⁶ The Polish anarchist Anya (Anna, Alta) Levin (1891–1971) was present in Saratov along with Kevrik and Makhno in 1918. In February, 1924, she was arrested in Warsaw's central station after getting off a train from Berlin with a suitcase containing anarchist literature, money, and dozens of photos of Nestor Makhno. Berkman wrote about her plight to the wealthy American dentist Michael Cohn on October 20, 1924:

"Little Anna" has been sentenced to 4 years' in Poland. Mainly due to the fact that the people there could not afford an attorney for her. They seem to have a very good man there, in Warsaw. The man who defended Makhno. You will probably remember that the latter was facing a sentence of 20 years. The charges were very serious, and no end of witnesses against him—most of them bought by the prosecution, of course. Well, the attorney was clever. He succeeded in exposing the frame up, and M. was acquitted. But recently I have been informed from Poland that the lawyer did not get paid even a third of what had been promised by the men who had the M. case in hand. They had no money, and so the matter remained. But when the Anna case came up, and the friends appealed to the same lawyer again, he refused to act, unless the debt be paid. That was impossible, of course, as several hundred dollars are due him. And therefore Anna had to pay the penalty in a prison sentence. There is no doubt that she could also have been cleared, or at least that she would have come off with a much lighter sentence.

I know Anna personally, from Minsk and later from Berlin work. A splendid type of young revolutionist, daring, devoted and intelligent. Anyhow, the prisons of Poland are hard, and it has become necessary to send her a little help.

Alexander Berkman Papers. IISH, Folder 14, p. 50.

IV.

Dear Alexander!

Lately I've been so absent-minded that I completely forgot to send you this receipt for the £1 for Anya. I'm hurrying to send it to you to avoid any misunderstanding. I haven't been able to get a receipt from Anya herself since it's now very difficult to exchange correspondence with her. I just received a letter from

Vera. She writes that she received a letter from you and from Mark.^[7]

With best wishes,

Max

Warsaw, May 21, 1925

⁷ Mark Mrachniy (1892–1975).

V.

Dear Friend Alexander!

Strangely enough, I only yesterday received your letter with 10 dollars, although the letter actually arrived here two weeks ago. The reason is that just around that time I found steady work, and it took the person at my mailing address two weeks to find me.

A receipt for the £1 I received was sent to you right after my last letter.

Concerning the \$10 you sent, I must confess that I'm very sorry, but ultimately, with so much going on in my life, I needed help and had to borrow from such sources. I'm sorry because this money on no account should be used for a different goal. But I hope that in a month or two I will replace this money with \$15. Right now I'm leaving the city for two weeks to rest. Incidentally, I only just received \$18 from close



Gerasim Tarlovsky

friends from New York for this purpose. So I'm off to a small provincial town to visit an acquaintance, where everything you need is 50% cheaper than in Warsaw and furthermore, there's a beautiful pine forest. I think that I'll benefit from the fresh air and it will be good for my mental health.

Now, in the newspaper *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*^[8] I read a review by Dr. M. Cohn about your book **The Russian Tragedy**.^[9] Is it really only available in English? I would very much like to familiarize myself with the contents of this book.



Dora Stepnaya

I received a letter from Vera recently. She's not at all well.

And can you tell me in what publication photographs of Vera, Dora, and Tarlovsky^[10] have been published? If this is available in German, then try to send it to me.

Concerning Anya, this is what I know. She has been lying in a hospital bed for several weeks now. She had a previous injury to her foot, and now this has flared up again for various reasons.

With best wishes,

Max

Warsaw, June 15, 1925.

⁸ Yiddish-language anarchist newspaper published in New York.

⁹ Alexander Berkman, **The Russian Tragedy**, (Berlin, 1922).

¹⁰ Vera Kevrik (1893–?), Dora Stepnaya (1897–1932), Gerasim Tarlovsky (1893–?). Their photos were published in **Letters from Russian Prisons** (London, 1925), p. 110.

VI.

Dear friend Alexander!

I returned from the provinces three weeks ago but have been unable to write to you because I hurt my hand and consequently was deprived of the possibility of working or writing. Now I need to tell you that Anya's situation is still getting worse. She has

been undergoing medical treatment for 8 weeks but remains bedridden. She's suffering, the poor thing, she has problems with both her heart and lungs. And we're getting medicine to her from the outside but our funds are very limited. She really needs more help than we can give her.

As for information from Polish prisons, at the present time the flow of this information is controlled by the Reds, since the majority of political prisoners are their brothers. I have approached them for information, but the response I received was that they can't give out information which could be used against them for propaganda purposes. Of course I spat in their face and set about collecting information through unofficial channels. But, of course, this can't be done quickly.

Generally one must consider that all the "Reds" sitting in Polish prisons are paid party hacks who have nothing in common with revolutionary idealism, with the ex-

ception of some naïve young girls and boys, who ended up in their milieu for lack of anything better to do . . .

I've met several times with Volman, who arrived here from America. By the way, he passed on greetings from you and Mark. It's possible that he and I will soon be able to put together a group which could provide ongoing support.

Take care,

Your Max

Warsaw, July 27, 1925

Warm-hearted greetings to Mark.

VII.

Dear Friend Alexander!

There's really no need for me to defend myself for not answering your letters. What will ease our correspondence is the wonderful news that Chernyak has been released from prison. He just came to visit me and found me ill. He said he will write himself right away. All the others are also free, only they want to send the

Ukrainians to their homeland. And this is very bad for them.

As long as my health permits.

With best wishes,

Max

Warsaw, November 18, 1925

Thanks to Sergei Ovsiannikov for finding the photographs of Max Kevrik and the reference to Viktor Babushkin's book. He also established that Kevrik and

Altenberg, previously regarded as different persons in the literature, were in fact the same person. Aleksandr Ermakov provided the reference to Kevrik's obituary.