

A Letter of Aron Baron from Biysk

(IISH: Flèche folder 46: 78–84)

Translator's introduction: Aron Baron finished a two-year term of imprisonment in the camps of northern European Russia in January 1925, but was then exiled to Biysk in Siberia. An industrial city with a population of 40,000 in 1925, Biysk was located in the remote Altai region. Aron was to spend three years there before moving on to further terms of exile and prison. This letter was written to his old friend Mark Mrachny, who was working for the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, based in Berlin.

April 12, 1925

Dear Mark,

It's likely that I'm not without blame in the fact that there are such large gaps between my letters. In addition to a multitude of circumstances "beyond my control", there are also circumstances which I can control; concerning which it is not convenient to speak of in a letter and the story of which I shall postpone until I meet with you in person. And this is how I imagine it to myself: you and I must get together to talk about everything and of course we won't be satisfied with just conversations. I don't know when our get-together will take place (possibly not for a few years), but it really must take place. Then, among other things, I shall explain some of the causes of my current lack of punctuality in correspondence. Until then, I'll let it go.



Aron Baron

The present letter is the fifth I've sent you since my arrival in Biysk. The first letter-postcard was sent on February 15, the second was sent ten days later. During March I sent two letters: one at the beginning of the month, the second (if I'm not mistaken) on March 22. I received two of your postcards dated March 2 and March 27, and a letter dated March 15. I promise from now on to write not less than three letters a month with all the regularity possible under the circumstances.

I have to tell you that up to now it's generally been difficult to write anything about my needs, as I didn't wish to give material to the enemy; it's a given that my correspondence is perlustrated. Some letters (from Vera Kevrik¹, Rubinchik²) arrive in such a mutilated state, so clumsily re-sealed, that no doubt remains. . . Indeed it would be strange, given the flawlessness of the intelligence apparatus, if our letters were left untouched. Of course everyone knows this, which is why only in rare cases do I allow myself to write on serious topics. So I was rather amazed that Rubinchik re-sent to me your letter to him of March 16. Yes, friends, you discussed quite enough.



Vera Kevrik

¹ Vera Evgenevna Kevrik (1893 – ?), an anarchist worker from Saratov, was arrested in September 1922 and sentenced in February 1923 to three years in the northern camps. In the north, she contracted malaria, endemic to the region due to the high density of mosquitos in the summer months. In March 1925 she was released from custody and sent, like Baron, on the long journey into exile in Biysk.

² Efram Borisovich Rubinchik-Meyer (1892–1938) was born in Minsk, and joined the revolutionary movement at the age of 13 as a social-democratic Bundist. After the defeat of the Revolution of 1905–1907, he emigrated to France, where he joined the anarchists. In 1917 he began working for the anarcho-syndicalist journal Golos Tuda as a typesetter. In 1918 he fought German armed forces as part of the anarchist detachment of V. M. Voline. Arrested by the OGPU in 1923, he was sentenced to three years in a political isolator. In June 1924 this sentence was changed to exile in Tomsk for the same term.

Never mind. From now on I shall follow your example and allow myself to write on a topic which up to now I've avoided: the state of our ranks, which, no matter what you say in your letter, is really dismal. Things are bad in Russia, still worse in America; spinelessness of some, apathy of others, and a lack of energy everywhere. Rubinchik, in forwarding your letter, delivered a ferocious tirade aimed at the disorganizers, whom he would like to get rid of and even consign to "rat row"³. In my opinion, this is too presumptuous, even bombastic, for if Rubinchik were to find himself abroad, of course he wouldn't be any more effective than the rest; despite all his ranting, he wouldn't get rid of anyone or consign them anywhere. I'm convinced that the whole affair would be limited to one, or at most a few, articles written by him in which he would threaten and fulminate, etc., but with no resulting improvement in the situation. His articles would give rise to new counter-articles and counter-accusations, and generally the whole affair would amount to an increase in the literature of abuse, which we cannot afford when we are trying to measure our strength with the enemy's. No, I don't want anything to do with this – let's leave the wrangling and the abusive quarrelling to those types who specialize in such things.⁴



Efrem Rubinchik-Meer

If, back in the old days, despite all the authority of the Union of Russian Workers and its leaders, it was still possible for the libelous Ermando-Dvigomirovsky *Zarya* to appear⁵, then what can we expect in today's era of reaction? To engage in squabbles with these gentlemen – means to lower yourself to their level. Of course it's impossible to tolerate these people, it's necessary to struggle with them mercilessly, but this must be a struggle that's effective, real, productive of results. These gentlemen must be isolated, they must be separated from any contact with the workers, and they must be left to the higher-ups along with their Russian role models to stew in their own juices. But this won't be accomplished through abuse. To go about this in a serious manner means to turn the project over to a couple of intelligent people who will learn how to act organizationally: not by raging into the void, not by dashing off half-cocked, but by preparing a reliable, strong, compact force which will penetrate to the very heart of the enemy and, at the most propitious moment, attack with all its strength. Take as much time as necessary for preparation, but when it's time to act, then strike zealously, from right and from left, blow after blow, without respite, harder and harder; that's the only way to win these days. The Bolsheviks proved this brilliantly – this is something we can learn from them. If in the beginning we had had half the organizational skill of the Bolsheviks, our cause would have advanced much farther.

So, my friends, that's my assessment of the situation. It would be rather strange if, among the amorphous whole which constitutes the anarchist movement, there were not found, even among the middle ranks, some despicable people. The fact of the presence of such gentlemen is quite deplorable, but that isn't the whole story. The slanderous bunch of American and Russian Karelinians⁶ wouldn't matter much if they were confronted by a strong and healthy body, vigorous

³ "Rat row" was the section of a prison reserved for informers – "stool pigeons" – to segregate them from the general prison population.

⁴ Baron's annoyance with Rubinchik received a certain justification in 1927 when the latter succumbed to pressure from the authorities, announced his break with anarchism, and was released from exile.

⁵ Baron has mangled some names here. **Robert Erdman** (1897–1938) and **Grigoriy Dvigomirov** (?–1921) were co-editors of the Russian-language anarchist journal *Vostochnaya Zarya* [Eastern Dawn] published in Pittsburgh (PA) in 1916. This publishing effort was the result of a split in the anarcho-syndicalist Union of Russian Workers of the United States and Canada, of which Baron was an active member before returning to Russia in 1917.

⁶ Karelinians: followers of **A. A. Karelin** (1863–1926), a divisive figure in the history of Russian anarchism. Active in the Russian revolutionary movement from the age of 18, Karelin did not become an anarchist until he was 46. He then applied his considerable talents to organizational and ideological work, causing a rift among anarcho-communists because of his attempt to introduce religious (mystical) concepts into anarchist doctrine. Following the 1917 Revolution,

and unified. The problem isn't with these thugs, the problem is with ourselves – with the lack of discipline, spinelessness, and slackness of those who are ideologically opposed to the pole which Karelin represents. We could certainly use some fresh blood in our own reduced ranks. I've had enough of the windbags, and the dilettantes can go do their own thing, but those who are left, even though small in number, can be used rationally, with the goal of getting the greatest results. For in the final account, only the results are important. Groups may exist for decades, they may mount a semblance of some kind of activity, but results – tangible, long-term results – are not forthcoming.

The history of the French movement is instructive: there we've been around for 50 years, the anarchists have been active in the unions for 30 years, and the result was that after two or three years of struggle, the Bolsheviks succeeded in leaving us with a handful of autonomists, some of whom will soon be withdrawing to the Unitary Confederation of Labour⁷. Of course I understand that my information is one-sided, gleaned almost exclusively from “Vie Ouvrière” and other Profinintern sources⁸. But even after discounting half of what is written by these far-from-objective hacks, one must assume that what's left isn't entirely fiction. And by what means did they achieve their success? How is it that more than once they've left us on the sidelines of the labour movement? Exclusively due to our lack of organization.

Recently I received a postcard from Amsterdam: it's an invitation to the 2nd Congress of Revolutionary Syndicalists, and is signed by Schapiro, Souchy, Kater, Borghi, etc.⁹ Of course I'm touched that they remembered me, and very glad that comrades from various countries are able to get together and find a common language. But I say to you openly, my old friend, there is not available to me a language in which I could reply to them properly, using solemn, pretentious figures of speech. I fear that this congress, like so many previous ones, will adopt fine, well-drafted resolutions, but that it will undertake little in the way of actions, that the increase in activity level will be slight.

I would love to be mistaken about this. It would be so nice to be there, to speak personally with everyone, both collectively and on an individual basis, and arrange matters with each person with complete clarity: this person will do this thing, and that person will do that thing, etc., and each person must carry out their assignments, achieving results in whatever has been decided upon, deliberately and thoughtfully, as part of the common goal. And get to work immediately.... To have the possibility of not being limited to stating general positions, but rather to be able to act decisively everywhere at the local level with due consideration for real circumstances – to get out of the quagmire in which the movement is wallowing – oh, my thoughts often fly to friends over there, to you and a few other isolated individuals.... But about this there's nothing to say now. Concerning the congress of the International Workers' Association, up to now I've read only one note in “Trud” [“Labour”] (organ of the VTsSPS)¹⁰ for March 25. The agenda was set out and the titles of the reports by Rocker and Lansink¹¹ are mentioned. I expect that something will also be said in “Vie Ouvrière”.

he caused further havoc by trying to reach an accommodation with the Soviet authorities, essentially by depoliticizing anarchism. Karelin enjoyed widespread respect in the movement, but after his death his tendency was attacked mercilessly by more orthodox ideologues of anarchism. His doctrines were influential with a substantial component of the Russian emigré community in North America, where some of his followers eventually made the transition to fascism.

⁷The Confédération générale du travail unitaire (CGTU) was a federation of radical unions founded in 1922 as a split from the socialist CGT, and included communists, anarcho-syndicalists, and revolutionary syndicalists. The “autonomists” were revolutionary syndicalists who rejected party involvement in union affairs but who otherwise supported the communist line.

⁸*La Vie Ouvrière* was an organ of the French Communist Party; the Red International of Trade Unions, based in Moscow, was commonly known as the Profinintern, from the Russian form of its name: Krasnyi internatsional profsoyuzov.

⁹The 2nd Congress of the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers' Association (IWA) was held in Amsterdam on March 25 1925. Leading figures of the IWA included **Alexander Schapiro** (1882-1946), **Augustin Souchy** (1892-1984), **Fritz Kater** (1861-1945), and **Armando Borghi** (1882-1968).

¹⁰The newspaper *Trud* [Labour] was published by the Vsesoiuznyi tsentralnyi sovet professionalnykh soiuzov [All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions] (VTsSPS).

¹¹**Rudolf Rocker** (1873-1958) and **Bernard Lansink jr.** (1884-1945) were also leading figures of the IWA.

One of these days I'm going to send you some Siberian newspapers. But beforehand I can tell you that they are an accurate reflection – not of reality, mind you – but rather a reflection of what is being written in Moscow and from Moscow. In general, we can keep up with things just well as in the centre; the difference is a question of scale, rather than substance. As at the centre, so also here, not a single conference takes place without the appropriate demonstrations (with banners and orchestras) – whether of “unaffiliated” peasants, teachers, or physicians – depending on the season and done in the Moscow style. Without fail an “unaffiliated”¹² worker or peasant will urge the study of Leninism and the “consolidation of unity” under the banner of the Comintern. Also without fail there will appear a female worker with a toy model, for example, of a railway signal . . . well, it varies according to whether there are teachers, teamsters, or agronomists. The welcoming speeches are followed by a long ceremony with singing, with the orchestra playing the Internationale, with applauding, more noisy applause, stormy applause, more stormy applause, rising up for a standing ovation, reaching a climax – never mind, don't even think about it. All this clapping-while-standing and clapping-while-not-standing is calibrated according to rank, reaching a crescendo when a representative of the higher-ups makes an appearance or leaves, e.g. a visitor from the Gubkom¹³ arrives at the district congress of soviets, or a visitor from the okrug¹⁴ arrives at the gubernia party conference. We are by no means lagging in having “obshchestvennosti”¹⁵: we have MOPR¹⁶, DVF (Friends of the Air Fleet), and many others; and if tomorrow there should be “voluntarily” formed a society called “Hands Off Abyssinia” or a society called “Friends of Worldwide Bolshevization”, you can be sure they will have branches here as soon as the corresponding directive arrives. There will be members – whole factories will join collectively – and there will be badges and dues – in a word, everything will be arranged. We're used to thinking of Siberia as the boondocks. Yes, it used to be, but not now in Soviet times. If it's required, within a day or two from various parts of the most distant provinces “unaffiliated” peasants of the most remote circles will simultaneously send to the Rumanian government (or to the Polish or English, depending on requirements) telegrams of indignation and protest against . . . well, against whatever is required in each case. For the millions of clueless Siberian peasants know perfectly well when and where to send their greetings or their protest, when to demonstrate, and what slogans to use. So as you see, Siberia is far from backward . . . well, it would be nice to say that about “us”.

A few words about myself. I'm still getting work (obviously on orders from Moscow). I have to register every week. Last time they asked me if I intended to turn over a new leaf soon.¹⁷ After work I study shorthand, Ido¹⁸, Italian and Spanish. So what about my finances? It's impossible to exist on my earnings; we were saved by what Nastenka¹⁹ sent – out of which we sent 25 rubles to Kevrik. She's sick, needs shoes and clothes, and if you can, please send her money. I'm still healthy, but my eyes hurt a lot. Fanya²⁰ is sick, it's her feet again. If we had the money, she would be going to the mud baths. She's going to write to you herself. I received your newspapers and the American

¹² “Unaffiliated” in this context means “not a member of the communist party”.

¹³ Gubkom = Guberniia [Provincial] Party Committee.

¹⁴ okrug = district

¹⁵ Non-governmental societies.

¹⁶ MOPR = Mezhdunarodnaia Organizatsiia Pomoshchi Revoliutsioneram [International Organization for Aid to Revolutionaries], created by the Comintern in 1922.

¹⁷ Up until 1930, anarchists in the USSR who renounced their beliefs (publicly, if they were well known) could expect to be released from prison or exile and not be subject to further persecution by the authorities (at least for a while).

¹⁸ Ido is a universal language which made its debut in 1907 as an improved version of Esperanto.

¹⁹ This may be reference to **Anastasia Ivanovna Galaeva** (1885 – 27.10.1925), active in the anarchist movement since 1904 and known for her prisoner support work. She had been in exile herself in northern Russia in 1922-24, but was released early due to illness (TB). She was living in Kiev in 1924-25.

²⁰ Aron's partner, Fanya Avrutskaya, suffered from chronic pain in her legs, which immobilized her for extended periods (Aron refers to this condition as rheumatism). Aron himself complained frequently of eye pain. Medical treatment for these ailments was virtually unobtainable.

“Nation”. I also received a postcard from Berkman. The boys from Narym²¹ are very upset about your splits. I wrote to them not long ago. Well, that’s enough for now. I shake your hand, old chap. Soon the younger generation will be consigning us to the archives, will they not?²² No, it’s too soon to put us in the archives – right, my fine, young friend?

Until we meet again, your Aron.

²¹ The Narym region of central Siberia was a major destination for exiles banished by the Russian state (since 1638!). It’s not clear what “splits” Baron is referring to. By 1925 three currents in the Russian anarchist diaspora could be discerned: (1) anarcho-syndicalists, who identified with the International Workers’ Association (Mrachny, Maximoff, Schapiro); (2) the Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad, which drew on the experience of the Makhnovist movement (Makhno, Arshinov, Voline); and (3) the Federation of Anarchist-Communists of the USA and Canada, with a libertarian (*svobodnik*) orientation. Each of these tendencies had their own press organs and were still on relatively good terms in 1925, but that state of affairs was soon to take a turn for the worse.

²² While Baron and Mrachny were still comparatively young men, they belonged to the generation which had become revolutionaries prior to 1917. This may be a subtle reference to the new generation of anarchists which appeared in the USSR in the 1920s only to be physically destroyed in the 1930s.