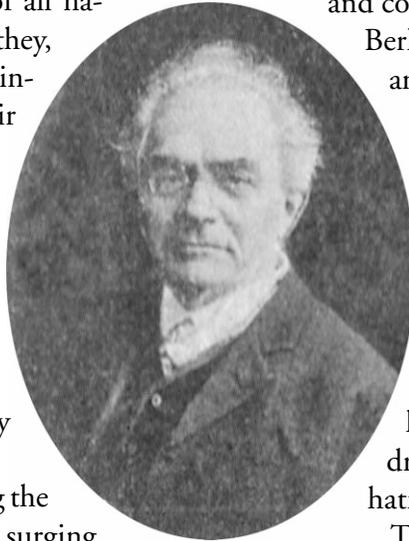

How I Became a Socialist: An Episode of My Boyhood.

by Alexander Jonas †

Published in *The Young Socialists' Magazine* (New York), v. 5, no. 3 (March 1912), pp. 5-6.

I shall never forget that wonderful spring of 1848. As the first warm breaths of air were wafted over Europe the hearts of the people of all nations were opened. It seemed as if they, too, like the snow and ice of the winter, were being melted out of their stony despair. As small brooks were changed overnight into roaring torrents which, feeding the great rivers, caused them to break down every resistance and flood the land, so did this sudden awakening of the European people swell and broaden the great revolutionary movement.

From Lisbon to St. Petersburg the mighty rulers in their castles felt its surging and throbbing and trembled. In Paris, then the heart of European revolution, another battle had been waged.



Again the blood of workingmen and women had been shed for freedom. And in the midst of this great stir and confusion the bomb burst in my home city, Berlin, where the bloody revolt of the 18th and 19th days of March, 1848, culminated in a complete victory of the people.

I understood but little of all this turmoil. Only 12 years of age, carefully reared in the protecting walls of a comparatively comfortable home, I had become penetrated with the bourgeois ideals and prejudices of the times. However, my father was not narrow-minded and had implanted into the hearts of his children a strong love for liberty, a passionate hatred against tyranny and oppression.

This feeling was fostered by the fact that I had at all times access to the modern literature of the day. I spent many hours in some corner of my father's

†- The Berliner Alexander Jonas (March 16, 1834-Feb. 3, 1912) was said to have been a intellectual of good humor and immense theoretical erudition. Jonas came to the United States in 1869. Jonas was an editor of the socialist New York weekly *Der Arbeiterstimme* [The Workers' Voice] in 1877-78. Along with Adolph Douai, Jonas was one of the founders of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* in 1878, a publication which eventually became one of the longest-running American radical newspapers, terminating only in 1932. He was a key participant in the German-American Socialist movement, first in the ranks of the Socialist Labor Party and later in the Socialist Party of America. In 1883, in the midst of a brief flirtation with the newly organized International Working People's Association of Johann Most, Jonas was attacked by the anarchist leader as a "stick-in-the-mud" who hindered the action of the working class. The two became enemies, spurring Jonas to tour on behalf of the party, where his powerful speeches helped restore the SLP from the near-fatal membership attrition it had suffered in the period. In 1888 Jonas was the candidate of the SLP for mayor of New York City, only accepting the nomination after being assured that English-language speechmaking was not a prerequisite of the office. He later ran for Congress two times of the SLP ticket. In 1889, Jonas was instrumental in the unseating of Wilhelm L. Rosenberg as National Secretary of the SLP and the shifting of the course of the organization from a predominantly electoral to a predominantly trade unionist orientation. Although he relinquished the editorial reins of the *Volkszeitung* in 1889, Jonas remained an important member of the SLP throughout the 1890s and continued to serve on the editorial board of the paper for the rest of his life. In the 1899 SLP split, the *Volkszeitung* group (Jonas included) were the most bitter opponents of the "administration faction" of Daniel DeLeon and Henry Kuhn. Their attempt to win control of the SLP was ultimately defeated in the courts by the SLP Old Guard, and a merger of the dissidents with a faction of the Social Democratic Party followed in 1900. This group merged with the remainder of the SDP to form the Socialist Party of America in 1901. Jonas died on Jan. 30, 1912, and the article here was translated for the magazine of the Young People's Socialist Federation — also published by the non-profit publishing society which produced the *Volkszeitung* — as part of a memorial tribute.

book store, poring over volumes which I only partly understood, but whose spirit became infused into my whole being. Or I would sit in some hidden nook drinking in greedily the words of our neighbors and friends, who came every afternoon and spent a few hours among the rows and rows of books, to talk over the happenings of the day.

It was on the afternoon of the 18th of March, 1848. The wise and worthy friends of my father were discussing in animated tones the news that King Frederick William IV had conceded to the people of Prussia all their demands — freedom of the press, freedom of speech, the right to hold meetings, a representative parliament — everything had been granted by the terror-stricken ruler. You can imagine the joy that swelled the hearts of these respectable citizens as they reviewed this victory and how delighted they were over the fact that Prussia was the only state in which the great victory had been won without the loss of a single drop of blood.

My piano teacher had just entered the room, and I was reluctantly preparing to go with him to take the unwelcome lesson, when my father engaged him in a discussion and I was permitted to stay a little while longer.

Suddenly the door opened and one of the usual group, who had not come to take part in the afternoon talk, walked rapidly into the room. His face was deadly pale, his eyes were burning as he brought us the terrible news. He had been walking through the Castle Square, only a hundred yards from our house — so he told us — where a great crowd of citizens had been collected as a demonstration of gratitude for the “gifts” of the king. Suddenly he had heard shots, and turning he had seen a cavalry regiment advancing against the peaceful crowds. He had escaped as quickly as possible to our store, but he feared the worst. His last words were already drowned by a tumult on the street. Everybody rushed out.

The scene which met my eyes made my heart stop for a moment. The horror of that moment will remain with me as long as I live. From the park down into the street poured a terror-stricken mass. Men and women, youths and aged men, wealthy and destitute, they fled through the streets as if driven by a thousand furies. At first there lay over them an awful silence, but presently there came from their midst the cry,

“Treason! Treason! Revenge! Revenge!” It all lasted but a few moments. Then the street became deathly still. Doors were closed and quickly stores and houses were locked.

How I came back into the house I do not remember. I recall only that I stood with my sisters and brothers at a window that overlooked the street. We heard horses’ hoofs. A squadron of cavalry passed by in the direction of the castle. They had attempted an attack upon a barricade and had been repulsed. Two horses were being led by the halters. Their saddles were vacant. The soldiers had been left dead beneath the barricades. The soldiers signed to us to withdraw and threatened us with their guns. These are the pictures that have made a lasting impression upon my mind. It was the Berlin March Revolution.

What followed I will tell you in a few words. The struggle against the troops lasted from that Friday afternoon through a terrible night to the next morning. Then for a short time all became still. But again hostilities broke out until at 11 o’clock the King gave up the fight and the troops withdrew, leaving a jubilant people in possession of the city.

Into my father’s house there came no sleep that night. Lying as it did in the middle of the city near the castle, in the territory which was absolutely controlled by the troops, it was like a peaceful island from which one could overlook the furious outbursts on every side.

We spent the night, with the family of the landlord, on the roof whence we could clearly observe every new struggle. And to the sound of the thundering guns, with a heart terror-stricken at the sight of blazing musketry and flaming buildings, I swore to give my life to the struggle for liberty.

But in one respect I was at that time still somewhat confused. In my mind there were just two parties to this struggle: the government and the people.

The government, according to my ideas, was represented by those men who wore uniforms, the soldiers, the police. Also those who had titles seemed to me to belong to that same hated side. On the other hand, I unhesitatingly assumed that every man who appeared in civil clothes must be a democrat, a revolutionary.

But in the very first weeks of the revolution the workmen became to be regarded as a separate factor. There came the news of a great parade of 20,000 work-

men to proclaim the establishment of a republic. Another time the employees of the locomotive factory arranged a demonstration. In fact, a great part of the militia camped in the castle garden for a whole day because of a rumor that the workmen were planning an attack on the new lawmaking assembly, because it intended to adopt a suffrage law with property qualifications.

Evidently there were two kinds of revolutionists, those in the dress-suit and those who work the worker's blouse. Still, I could not quite understand it. Were not my father's friends real revolutionists, real republicans? What more could the workers be?

It was late in the fall of the year when the understanding of the difference came to me. The summer had brought countless "small troubles" between the "bourgeois" and the "workers." In the fall a number of men who were working on new streets on the outskirts of the city demanded an increase in wages, which was promptly and decidedly refused by the new government. The workmen arranged a meeting to discuss ways and means. Then the bourgeois, quickly forgetting that they had just risked their own lives for the right of free speech, sent out police to break up some meeting, who were sent home badly beaten.

The numerous locksmiths, carpenters, bricklay-

ers, and other men who worked in this district made common cause with them and took a threatening attitude. At length things came to a crisis. With the help of the militia the "revolt" was suppressed in a few hours.

I remember distinctly how I watched the militia passing on that day. Just then a man, a giant in size, a typical revolutionary, a wounded arm tied up in a sling, came rushing along the street. When he approached us he pointed over to the passing militiamen and cried loud and fearlessly: "Fine heroes, brave citizens, are they not? To shoot upon defenseless workers who are asking for more bread. But the next time things will be different. Then we will have guns."

Then I understood that there was a difference between citizen and citizen, that the new republican government, while it was serving the interests of the bourgeois, had given nothing to the laborers. Why? Why? I could not find a satisfactory answer. Why should the bourgeois refuse the workers their trifling demands? When at last I found the answer, when I had come to a realization of the fact that there was a difference between the interests of the bourgeois capitalists and their workers which could never be wiped out, then I had, though I did not realize it until many, many years had passed, taken my first step as a Socialist.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

Second Edition: May 2006 — with revised and expanded Jonas biography.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.