

Karl Marx

BY FRANZ MEHRING

Translator's Note

The following two chapters are from a new book by Franz Mehring entitled "Karl Marx, Geschichte seines Lebens," intended as a contribution to the hundredth anniversary of Marx's birthday, (May 5, 1918).

The book is written with both admiration and criticism for the great subject, and both qualities are needed in a good biography, as Mehring points out in his foreword. Comrade Rosa Luxemburg has contributed a masterly bit from her pen; the portion dealing with the second and third volumes of "Capital," which forms the third section of Chapter XII. Another brave woman who has fought in the front ranks of the proletariat, Comrade Clara Zetkin, "the heiress of the Marxian spirit," is she to whom the book is dedicated.

1. GENIUS AND SOCIETY

Although it may be said that Marx found a second home in England, the term "home" must not here be understood with too wide a connotation. He was never in any way molested in England because of his revolutionary activity, and yet England was often the object of his attacks. The government of the "greedy and envious nation of shopkeepers" was inspired by a greater degree of self-respect and self-consciousness than those continental governments, which, terrified by their evil consciences, send the darts and javelins of the police after their opponents even when the latter are active only in the fields of discussion and propaganda.

In another, profounder sense, however, Marx found it impossible to regard any country as his home, once he had learnt to read in the very soul of bourgeois society, with his divining eyes. The lot of genius in that social system is a long story, and it has given rise to the most varied opinions; from the innocent faith in God, which is the Philistine's and which promises final victory to all true genius, to Faust's melancholy reflection: Those few who ever had a trace of it,

And in their folly hid it not;
Revealed their souls, their visions to the rabble;
The cross, the stake, have been their certain lot.

The historical method that owes its development to Marx permits us to see more deeply in this field too. The Philistine promises every genius a final victory, simply because he is a Philistine; but whenever a real genius has not been crucified or burnt at the stake, it has simply been because the genius finally consented to become a Philistine. Had they not been attached by their bourgeois wigs to the social system of their time, Goethe and Hegel would never have become recognized "great men" of bourgeois society.

Whatever may be the merits of bourgeois society, which, in this connection, must be regarded only as the most developed form of class system, and however numerous these merits may be, it certainly cannot be said that this society ever afforded a safe refuge for genius. And it would be impossible for bourgeois society to play this part, for the very nature of genius implies the opposition of the creative impulse of an unfettered human spirit, to established tradition, and colliding with the barriers that are necessary to the existence of class society. There is a little lonely churchyard on the island of Sylt, in the North Sea, and it harbors the unknown dead washed ashore by the waves, and the cross standing in the churchyard bears the inscription: "The cross of Golgatha is a home of the homeless." To be sure it was not intended in this inscription to indicate the lot of genius in a class-ruled society, yet the fact has been well stated in these words: Genius is homeless in the class system; in such a system its home is only on the cross of Golgatha.

Of course, the case is altered if genius can come to some agreement with class society. Whenever it has placed its services at the disposal of the bourgeois, in order to overthrow feudal society,

genius has required an immense power, which has always disappeared, however, as soon as genius has undertaken to act on its own authority; the rock of St. Helena has then been its asylum. Or, if genius consents to don the frock coat of the Philistine, it may rise to the position of a Grand-Ducal Saxon Minister of State at Weimar, or a Professor at the Royal Prussian University at Berlin. But unhappy is the lot of the genius who, in proud independence and inaccessibility, opposes bourgeois society, prophesying its downfall on the basis of its own inner structure, forging the weapons which are to inflict a death-blow on this society. For such a genius, bourgeois society has only racks and tortures, which may, to be sure, seem less savage to the external eye than the crucifixion of the ancient world and the "auto da fe" of medieval society, but are in reality much more cruel.

Of all the geniuses of the 19th century, none suffered so cruelly under the tortures of this lot than Karl Marx, the most inspired of them all. He was obliged to struggle with the sordid cares of daily life even in the very first decade of his public activity, and when he settled in London he entered upon the life of an exile with its worst burdens, but his truly Promethean lot cannot be said to have begun until, after a painful ascent to his prime, in the full flourish of his manly energy, he was daily assailed by the petty troubles of life, by the depressing worries as to his daily bread; and this lasted for years and for decades! Up to the day of his death he did not succeed in establishing himself in the domain of bourgeois society, even in the most rudimentary sense.

And yet, his mode of life was far removed from what a Philistine may be inclined to term, in the generally accepted disreputable sense of the word, "the life of a genius." His diligence was as tremendous as his strength; early in life his iron constitution began to be undermined by the excessive labors of his days and nights. Incapacity for labor he considered to be the death sentence of any man that was more than an animal, and he meant these words in dead earnest; once, having been seriously ill for several weeks, he wrote to Engels: "These days, being completely unfit for work, I have read the following: Carpenter's Physiology, Lord's ditto, Kolliker's Theory of Tissues, Spurzheim's Anatomy of the Brain and Nervous System, and Schwann and Schleiden's Zellenlehre." And in spite of all his eagerness for study, Marx remained ever mindful of his own statement, made when he was still a young man, that a writer must never work in order to make money, but that he must make money in order to be able to work; Marx never underestimated the "imperative necessity of earning one's living."

But all his exertions were of no avail against the suspicions, the hatred, or, in the most favorable case, the fears, of a hostile world. Even those German publishers who wished to emphasize their independence were afraid of the name of this disreputable demagogue. All German parties alike slandered him, and whenever the clear outlines of his position forced their way through the mists of deception, it was killed by the malicious treachery of systematic silence. Never has a nation been so completely and for so long a period deprived of a knowledge of its greatest thinker.

The only connection that might have enabled Marx to secure a comparatively firm footing in London was his work as a contributor to the New York Tribune, which covered a full decade, beginning in 1851. The Tribune, with its 200,000 readers, was then the wealthiest and most widely circulated newspaper of the United States, and, through its agitation in favor of American Fourierism, it had at least raised itself above the level of mere capitalistic money-making. And the conditions under which Marx was to work for the Tribune were not exactly unfavorable; he was to write two articles a week and to get ten dollars

for each article. This would have meant an annual income of \$1,000, which would just about have enabled Marx to keep his head above water in London. Freiligrath, who went so far as to boast that he was eating the "beefsteak of exile" in London, was not at first paid for his business activity.

And of course, no difficulty was raised as to the question whether the fee received by Marx from the American paper corresponded to the literary and scientific value of his contributions. A capitalist newspaper calculates on market prices, and in bourgeois society it has every right to do so. Marx never required more than this, but he might reasonably have asked, even in bourgeois society, a fulfillment of the terms of the contract once made and perhaps also some degree of deference for his work. But the Tribune and its publisher showed not a trace of these qualities. Theoretically, to be sure, Dana was a Fourierist, but practically he was a hardheaded Yankee; his Socialism, according to an angry declaration of Engels, amounted simply to the lousiest petty bourgeois cheating. Although Dana knew very well how valuable a contributor Marx was and made liberal use of Marx's name to his subscribers, whenever he did not print Marx's letters as the products of his own editorial activity — and this occurred rather often and never failed to arouse Marx's righteous indignation — he made use of every manner of brutality to which a capitalist can resort in his relations with a source of labor-power that he is exploiting.

He not only reduced Marx to half pay whenever business was low, but actually only paid for those articles which he really printed, and had the effrontery to throw into his waste-paper basket everything that did not suit his momentary purpose. For three weeks, for six weeks, in succession, Marx's compositions would take this course. To be sure, the few German newspapers in whose columns Marx's contributions found temporary asylum, such as the Wiener Presse, did not treat him better. He was therefore absolutely correct in his statement that in newspaper work he fared worse than any space-writer.

Already in 1853 he longed for a few months of solitude, to devote to learned investigation. "It seems as if I cannot have it. All this newspaper scribbling bores me. It takes away much of my time, distracts me, and what does it amount to, after all? Be as independent as you like; you are bound to your paper and to its readers, especially if you are paid in cash, as I am. Purely scientific studies are quite a different matter." And how much more savage were Marx's exclamations after he had worked for several additional years under Dana's gentle sway: "It is in truth disgusting to be condemned to regard it as a piece of good fortune to be printed in such a rotten sheet. Breaking bones, grinding them, and making soup of them, like the paupers in the workhouse, that is all that your political work, of which you get more than you want in such a business, amounts to." Not only in his scanty sustenance, but particularly in the absolute insecurity of his entire existence, Marx fully shared the lot of the modern proletariat.

Things of which we formerly had only the most general notions are shown with the most heart-rending clearness in his letters to Engels; he once had to remain indoors because he had neither shoes nor a coat suitable for street wear; another time, he lacked the few pence necessary to buy writing paper or a newspaper to read; on a third

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MADRID, Feb. 28.—The cabinet resolved today to suspend constitutional guarantees throughout Spain, as the result of syndicalism (belief in sympathetic strikes). The syndicalists are alleged to have captured practically the entire industrial organization of the country.