Michael Gold

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Summary: A remembrance of her long and deep friendship with Mike Gold upon hearing of his death. Recounts their shared zeal for revolution in the 1910s, his anguish over the draft, and his support during the time of her conversion in the 1920s. Notes their differences over the use of violence, she a pacifist. Keywords: obituary (DDLW #853).

I last saw Mike Gold two years ago when I visited Oakland, where he was living with Elizabeth, his wife. She and I had gathered shells and rocks together on the beaches of Staten Island ten years ago, just as Mike and I had explored the beaches forty years before, picnicking with artists Maurice Becker and Hugo Gellert, sometimes on a Staten Island beach and sometimes at Palisades Park. It was the year the old **Masses** was suppressed, and during the last months of its existence there was a general feeling of irresponsibility stemming from our incapacity to do anything in the face of the war into which we had just been dragged, after a Presidential election won with the slogan "He kept us out of the war." We were marking time.

When I first met Mike I had been working on the **New York Call**, a socialist paper that had a few anarchists and members of the Industrial Workers of the World on the staff. One editor was an A.F.L. man and another supported the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which was out of the A.F.L. at the time, just as some unions are out of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. now. When it came to all the conflicts after the Russian revolution, we were young enough not to pay much attention to the old guard, but instead to rejoice in a victorious revolt of the proletariat and the peasants of Russia. We all went to meetings, to picnics, to dances at Webster Hall, stayed up all night and walked the streets, and sat on the piers and sang. Great things were happening in the world, along with the senseless capitalistic war, which to us represented the suffering and death that came before the victorious resurrection. I thought in those terms then. "Unless the seed fall into the ground and die, it remaineth alone. But if it die it bears much fruit." The suffering and the death that accompanied war and revolution seemed to make the keenness of our joy the more poignant. The revolution was world-shaking, it liberated the people, the ancient lowly, the burden bearers, the poor, the destitute, and opened up to them a new life. We longed ourselves to be able to take part in that suffering.

We were far away from it all, of course. We were young, we had found ourselves, in that we had a cause, and we served it in our writing. It was through his writing that I came to know Mike. In the summer of 1917 I had been left alone in the office of the **Masses** as an editor's assistant while Floyd Dell was on vacation and Max Eastman away on a money-raising and speaking expedition. I opened the office and answered the mail and sent back the work of some eminent

poets with rejection slips and one written word, "Sorry." In my haste to get through with office duty and go out into the streets, to meetings, and to the beaches, the work of the **Masses** did not seem of vital importance.

I walked the streets of the East Side, which I had come to love (I had been living there for a year and a half), down on Cherry Street, on East Broadway, on Madison Street. I knew the Jews and their life there, I bathed with the women in those little bath houses (there were no baths or hot water in the tenements). I visited Mike's home on Chrystie Street, down the street from the present location of the Catholic Worker, and his mother, a stern and beautiful woman who wore the wig and observed the dietary laws, offered me food, even though I was a **shiksa**, but she did not speak to me.

My suffering at that time was brief, but Mike's was profound. I went to jail in Washington, upholding the rights of political prisoners. An anarchist then as I am now, I have never used the vote that the women won by their demonstrations before the White House during that period. But Mike was suffering because of the threat of the draft, which hung over all young men then, as it does today. It was a physical, as well as a mental and spiritual anguish and it undermined his health so that Max Eastman helped him to get away to Mexico where the "draft dodgers," as they are always contemptuously termed, were taking refuge. (I would like to call attention here to the fact that one of the saints of the Catholic Church, the Cure of Ars, St. John Marie Vianney, a Frenchman who is still famous as a patron of parish priests, was a draft dodger and hid out in barns to escape the draft during the Napoleonic wars.)

In those days conscientious objectors had no rights. There was no alternative service. There were no discussions as to whether you were opposed to all wars or only the present one, whether your conviction was a religious one or not. Mike was certainly not opposed to war as such. He thought that the revolution had to be a violent one, and that although the workers did not want violence or advocate it, it would be forced upon them, and then they would be exercising their right to defend themselves and their dear ones. His faith in the class struggle and violent revolution never wavered over the years.

Mike came back from Mexico not long after the war was over, and it was at this time that he took the name Mike Gold, rather than Irwin Granich, which was his family name. It will always be as Mike Gold that he will be remembered.

I saw Mike some years later in Chicago, where I worked briefly for Bob Minor on the **Liberator**. Then I returned to New York and, thanks to the sale of my first novel to Hollywood, I was able to buy a beach bungalow on a section of Staten Island that is almost as undeveloped today as it was then. I was living a married life, spending a good deal of time reading and going through a painful and tortured, yet joyful process of conversion to a public acknowledgment of a faith. It was painful because I had to give up a common-law husband with whom I was very much in love and with whom I still feel a most loving friendship. I write of these personal matters because Mike was very much around at that

time; two of his brothers had bought a beach bungalow three doors down the road from mine, and we all swam and dug clams and fished together and spent long hours on the beach. One of his brothers was married and had two little children who played with my two-year-old daughter. Mike, who loved kids and did not yet have any of his own, came down often to be with us all.

Never for a moment did Mike try to argue me out of the step I was about to take. My small daughter was already baptized and I tried to get to Mass every Sunday in the little village church, although I was not yet a baptized Catholic. Mike was editor of the **New Masses** at the time, and I wrote a few things for him. He seemed to understand my misery and to sense that there had to be a price to pay, sometimes a heartbreaking price, in following one's vocation. Neither revolutions nor faith are won without keen suffering. For me Christ was not to be bought for thirty pieces of silver but with my heart's blood. We buy not cheap in this market. Because I was so unhappy I clung to my old friends. I did not know a single Catholic and I suppose I considered Mike my oldest friend.

Mike was indirectly involved with the beginning of the Catholic Worker. In 1932, I was doing some free-lance writing and Mike's brother George was one of the leaders of the hunger march that was to converge on Washington in December. George and Mike used to drop in to see me where I was living with my brother and his wife on the East Side, and I became so enthusiastic about the march that I went down to cover it for the **Commonweal**, along with the late Mary Heaton Vorse, who was covering it for, I think, the **Atlantic Monthly**. It was the march and the devout prayers I said at the shrine of the Immaculate Conception at Catholic University, that brought the French peasant, and teacher, Peter Maurin, to my doorstep to start me editing the **Catholic Worker**.

Peter Maurin was a philosophical anarchist in the tradition of Kropotkin and never missed an opportunity to express his distrust of the State. He agreed with Jefferson that the less government there is, the better. He wanted to stay out of the N.R.A. (National Recovery Administration) and all the other initialed projects and he endorsed the union movement only as long as it kept the State out of its bargaining with the bosses. And of course **bargaining** was a bad word; labor was not a commodity to be bought and sold and bargained for. Man by his labor was creative, working for the common good, creating order out of chaos. Peter wanted to rebuild society within the shell of the old society, which meant patience, suffering and endurance, the kind of nonviolence that characterizes the work of Cesar Chavez in Delano, California and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

One day, in the fifties, after Peter Maurin was dead, Mike, his wife Elizabeth and their two sons Carl and Nicholas visited us on Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island. They had brought me a gift, an old print with a painted representation of a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Anne of Brittany. They had brought it from France, carefully rolled in a newspaper. We framed it and hung it in the dining room of the farm. St. Anne is the patron saint of grandmothers, since she was the mother of the Blessed Virgin and the grandmother of Jesus of Nazareth. We still talked of how man's freedom could be protected, how man's basic needs could

be provided for through collectives, or cooperatives, or farming communes, as Peter Maurin always called them, and how the State could progressively wither away. But we always came back to the problem of the use of force in bringing about the common good. For example, Mike pointed out that the **kibbutzim** were well-armed and part of a powerful state they had helped to build up.

I remembered the one time Mike had turned bitter against me and the **Catholic Worker**. "The brotherly love the **Catholic Worker** preaches would be more understandable if it were not that they were pro-Franco during the Spanish civil war," he wrote in his column "Change the World." We were not, of course, pro-Franco but pacifists, followers of Gandhi in our struggle to build a spirit of nonviolence. But in those days we got it from both sides; it was a holy war to most Catholics, just as world revolution is holy war to Communists. I call attention to these fundamental differences about religion and the attitude to force to show how there can be strong personal friendship between a Catholic and a Communist and constant seeking of concordances and agreements.

It was indeed more than a personal friendship; it was a friendship between families. Mike was the best man at my sister's wedding forty years ago and last week, when her son wrote to her of Mike's death, he recalled his gentle and loving spirit. He indeed had a gentle and loving spirit but some of his writing was strong stuff, because of the bitterness that the sight of poverty and human distress always inspired in him.

We lament his passing and send our sympathetic love to Elizabeth, thanking God that Mike left her sons and grandchildren to comfort her.