

From Union Square to Rome

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Chapter 5 - Rayna Prohme

Summary: An account of the deep friendship with Rayna Prohme whose joyousness and love for truth deeply impressed her. Although Rayna died a Communist, she is counted among those who belong "to the invisible unity of the Church." (DDLW #205).

JUST last winter I gave you a book to read, *Personal History* by Vincent Sheean, and in that book is a chapter called *Revolution*. Mostly that chapter is the story of Rayna Prohme who has fascinated all who read the book. Of all the people Sheean writes about, she stands out clear, beautiful, and rare, a character one meets but once in a lifetime. You met her, but you do not remember it. I brought her home with me to meet the family that first summer vacation, but you were only three then.

I saw her first on the train going down to the university in September. She was the one person I remember on the train filled with students going back to school. She stood out like a flame with her red hair, brown eyes, and vivid face. She had a clear, happy look, the look of an honest and sincere person. She was two or three years older than I, and was entering her sophomore year then. I was not to meet her until later that first year.

Her father, I believe, had been president of the Board of Trade in Chicago and her family was wealthy. She had fallen in love in high school with a young Jew born on Chrystie Street on the East Side of New York, who was living during his high school years with relatives in Chicago. She herself was a Jew and her family opposed the marriage because of her youth and his poverty, and wanting to be near him she had gone to the state university so that she could live away from home.

In spite of brilliant scholarship, an outstanding personality, good looks, and wealth, she was not invited to belong to any sorority, and with others of her race she lived in a rooming house on the edge of the campus. It was the first time I came up against anti-Semitism.

The only benefits those two years at college brought me was my friendship with Rayna and my own sense of complete independence. It was at the time when I was going hungry and becoming increasingly unpopular that I first met her.

There were not more than a dozen people in the writing club I had joined and Rayna and Raph, the boy to whom she was engaged, had been going over the stories turned in for the college magazine when they came across mine. You remember, it was the story on going hungry. Rayna was enthusiastic and we felt we knew each other immediately. The first night we met, the three of us went to a restaurant and sat over coffee for hours. Rayna herself did not write, but Raph did, and she was an energetic critic.

I do not know what her ambition was at that time, if she had any. She was in love and she saw things through Raph's eyes. Or rather she did the studying, the thinking, and tried to guide his thought. Everything she did was for him, and she poured her glowing love out upon him, and all the wealth of her mind and heart. He writes Broadway plays now and has a yacht and a penthouse apartment. But that is not what she wanted for him. She was avid for knowledge and for beauty, and what she wanted him to be was a great novelist who would increase the world's store of beauty.

She was not particularly interested in the social problem then, nor was she for many years. In the light of the story told in *Personal History* it is interesting to think of her as she was when I knew her.

The joy and happiness of those days is still with me. We took long walks over the prairie. We picnicked with our books and a phonograph, playing some Beethoven symphony under the limitless sky while the smell of sweet clover filled the air and the meadow larks pierced the quiet with their songs. And now her dust, in an urn, reposes in Moscow, and I alone pray for her soul, for I am the only one she knew who has a faith in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Rayna used to laugh at my absorption in Socialism. She felt that I was unbalanced on the subject and was looking at life from only one angle. She thought, too, emotional creature that she was, that my interest was too emotional and not founded upon solid knowledge and she used to urge me to study philosophy and psychology. But I was interested in facts, not speculation. Rayna insisted upon my coming to live with her.

Do you remember in *David Copperfield* your own sense of gratitude to Aunt Betsy for taking David in and feeding him and sheltering him? You should feel grateful to Rayna in the same way. It had been a hard life I was leading. I had not had enough food or sleep for a long time and I had become morbid. Though I rejoiced in my sufferings, taking a grim pleasure in them, I took that pleasure defensively. I built up a consciously dramatic attitude to keep myself from becoming crushed. I was defiant so that I should not own myself beaten or frightened by life.

If I had conformed, I could have had easy jobs, such a job as clerk in the office of the registrar, for instance—neat, orderly jobs. If I had been the good student that I was in high school, I would have had my way made easy for me. One girl I knew gained an instructor's job after two years in the university. I knew that I could have made my way safe and secure, but that was not what I wanted. I was

not merely perverse and undisciplined; I was choosing another way, I thought, and since I deliberately chose it, I had no right to regard my poverty or my hardships as other than of my own choosing.

But just the same I had suffered. Rayna took me in. She paid room rent for me out of her allowance. Her family insisted that she take a pint of cream a day, for she was a fragile creature and all her glowing vitality was of the spirit. She made me drink that cream with her, trying to put some flesh on my bones. We ate together at the rooming house table, or we ate out at restaurants. What was hers was also mine, and we loved each other.

I scarcely remember what we read or what we talked about. I remember Rose Pastor Stokes coming to lecture at the school and Rayna and Raph, who worked on the college paper, interviewed her. I remember the argument about what to print and what trouble they would encounter printing all that Mrs. Stokes said. Raph would not print it, nor would the editor, much as they believed in all Mrs. Stokes had to say about the capitalist system and birth control, which she claimed “the system” fought in order to keep the worker oppressed, in order to have more cannon fodder.

We were fascinated by Mrs. Stokes who was from the East Side as Raph was, a factory girl married to a millionaire whom she met during a strike in New York years before. We were excited by the romance of her life as well as by her vivid personality.

Neither of us having any contact with Catholicism or its teaching, we knew of no arguments at all against birth control.

Prominent Socialists, Scott Nearing amongst them, lectured at the university and we met them. John Masefield came and lectured haltingly and we read all his poems. *Spoon River Anthology* had just been published and everybody did imitations of the verse of Edgar Lee Masters. Vachel Lindsay was another favorite and Carl Sandburg.

Some of those Sundays when we went out on the prairie to picnic we took volumes of poetry with us and Rayna read aloud. She herself was poetry to us, both Raph and I loved her so. Not all our discussions were just in the realm of ideas. We were girls, Rayna and I, and much interested in clothes. I had one suit and two blouses, and one silk crepe dress which shrank so when I washed it myself that I could no longer wear it. Rayna had lovely things and used to insist (she did not have to insist very hard) that I borrow them those evenings when we went to the International Club. I was “going with” a young Spaniard whose name I cannot even remember. I liked Raph far better, seeing him through Rayna’s eyes.

Later, when I was in Chicago, I saw her only occasionally because she was taking post-graduate courses in the University of Chicago and I was working nights in a print shop. After I left school, she came to New York and spent a summer with me. She and Raph already had discovered that theirs had been a school

time love and they separated, he to work on Broadway and she to go back to her academic life. I felt that she was burying herself and she felt that I was throwing myself away. Actually she spent years of study before she met the Communist who later became her husband.

Vincent Sheean has brought out many of her qualities in his picture of her. He has told of their days and nights of conversations both in Hankow where he met her and in Moscow. She was doing an editing job on a Communist newspaper when they met and must have been twenty-seven at the time.

Some years later I learned that she had died, and I felt that a dearly loved friend from whom I had been separated, had gone out of my life for good. It was just as I was becoming a Catholic that she was becoming a Communist in China. Her work there was with Madame Sun Yat-sen and with Borodin, and after the Communist regime in Hankow broke down, she escaped with Madame Sun Yat-sen.

Sheean brings out her bravery and her courage which was of the spirit and strong as death. She was certainly not a creature without imagination, so she must have shrunk in the flesh from the prospect of what might overtake her and those other Communists with whom she worked if she did not succeed in escaping. I wish I knew more of the details of that flight from the conquered city. Sheean himself just gives a bare outline.

He saw her again in Moscow and characteristically she was about to take courses in the Lenin Institute to prepare herself to become a propagandist for world-wide work. It was then, a few weeks after he saw her again, that she suddenly was stricken and died of cerebral hemorrhage. His story of her last days and the account of that Red funeral and the procession in the rain to the crematorium is heart-rending.

I tell you all this, though you have read the book, because Sheean brings out two outstanding traits in her character which made so great an impression on me that I can never forget them. One was her joyousness and the other her love of truth. She had those qualities when he met her. He speaks with love of the way she used to laugh with him over all the incongruities and inconsistencies of their surroundings. It was pure joy that made her laugh with such heartiness.

I remember writing once that joy always brought laughter to me. The sound of a Bach prelude on the university organ as we played hockey on the field in back of the big auditorium; the crowing of a baby; the sight of dolphins leaping through the water alongside of a ship on my way to Florida—these are things I remember off-hand that brought such joy to my heart that I had to laugh as a release, as an expression of that joy in my heart.

Rayna's joyousness came because she saw always what was noble and beautiful in life and she was happy in it. And I can see now, how being a Communist brought out this spirit in her even more.

Her other trait that Sheean emphasized was her love of truth and I am sure that

it was that love which, if she had lived, would have forced her to give up the Communist Party. He told that when he was interviewing her she expressed her great distaste for the “lying” that Communist propaganda makes necessary. She told him that when she could not tell the truth, she preferred to remain silent. I do not think she would have made a very good propagandist, no matter how many years she spent in the Lenin Institute. What I wish to bring out is the positiveness of these virtues, these natural virtues.

Most young people think of virtue as something negative. They think that by avoiding sin they are being good. They think of purity as an absence of impurity. They have not committed those sins which they might have committed. Yet we should think certainly of purity as a shining positive virtue, rather than as a negative one—one that makes itself felt, that stands out glowingly.

It is the Old Testament that emphasizes the “Thou shalt not’s.” The New emphasizes the positive virtue of love which comprises all the rest.

Have you not met in your life people who stood out because some virtue shone in them, was predominant? I can remember people whose goodness shone as a positive adornment, which attracted others and filled them with longing. It would be so easy for us if there were more to inspire us as they do.

Rayna’s truth stood out as a positive virtue. She was honest, pure, and loving, but above all shone her joyousness and her truth.

Catholics who read this may be surprised at this glowing appraisal of one who did not believe in Christ. I must remind them that in spite of living in the United States, in a so-called Christian nation, there were no Christians whom Rayna met who could induce her, either by their actions or their words, to believe in the way of the Cross, in the glorified Christ.

Nothing in her reading that was abstruse and philosophical in school brought her the truth. She was hungering for it, she loved it, she searched for it in years of study at the University of Illinois, but she never found it. She thought she had found it in Communism, then she died. And who knows but that just at death she did find it? We cannot tell. She was searching for it.

I thought of Rayna and the appeal Communism made to her when I read those lines of Maritain:

“The Russian Communists have clearly appreciated those truths (the necessity of reviving the moral ideas that govern the life of the social body as such). They have even formed their party into a kind of brotherhood with an exacting and rigorous discipline, and by every means in their power they endeavor to renew after their fashion the moral bases of life of the whole people, so that what gives their materialist and atheist revolution the deepest power of attracting the souls of men . . . is the indestructible spiritual appeal (unconfessed because it is not in accordance with the Marxian table of values) of justice, and poverty, of fortitude in suffering.”

I always felt that Rayna had those reserves of “spiritual energy” which Maritain speaks of. “It is to be noted,” he writes, “that the reserves of spiritual energy that are to be found in human nature may be liberated by preaching and example and set in operation in the hearts of many without any sense of spiritual things other than that which they may find in the concrete experience of the fight for justice here below. . . .”

“It follows from the idea of Catholicity that every just man of non-Christian denomination belongs to the invisible unity of the Church and on this ground only has a title to salvation. . . .”

So reading, my heart is comforted about Rayna, for most assuredly she loved truth and justice