*The Last Maximalist: An Interview With Klara Klebanova**

By Paul H. Avrich

I was born in 1888 of a middle-class Jewish family in the town of Novozibkov in Chernigov province. My father was a prosperous timber merchant. I was the youngest of four daughters and a son, and we all went to a *gimnaziia*. The town was relatively progressive: it had no ghetto and was an active educational as well as commercial center, with several good schools. And it was there that I got my first lessons in revolution.

The main force that drove me to the revolutionary movement was my compassion for the oppressed peasantry. It was a feeling derived not so much from personal observation as from my reading of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Uspensky, Nekrasov, and other writers who so vividly described the unbearable conditions under which the peasants were living. There developed within me a strong sympathy for these downtrodden and abused people. I came to idealize the Russian peasant, whom I knew primarily through my reading. Everything about him seemed lofty and enchanting, and his suffering became my own.

My last year in the *gimnaziia* coincided with the 1905 Revolution. The whole city came out to fight against the tsar and the authorities. It was a wonderful sight! Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries spoke to us students and tried to draw us into their movements. I became a member of a self-education circle in which we studied social, economic, and political questions. But before long an ideological divergence emerged among us. Some of us leaned towards the Social Democrats, others towards the Socialist Revolu-

[1] New York City, January 13, 1973. For further reminiscences see Klara Klebanova-Halpern, "Erinerungen fun a revolutsionerke," serialized in the *Jewish Daily Forward* beginning March 12, 1922.

tionaries. I belonged to the latter group. I devoured the literature distributed by the SR agitators. My older sister, Dora Lazurkina, had studied in St. Petersburg and was already a dedicated Marxist. She tried without success to convince me that only the working class was capable of liberating Russia from capitalist exploitation, and that the peasant, with his disposition towards private ownership and his petty-bourgeois psychology, would only be an impediment to the revolution. My sister, by the way, remained a lifelong Bolshevik, one of seven young women whom Lenin prepared in Switzerland for important roles in the party. She is still alive in the Soviet Union, and a few years ago she appeared at a party congress and told of having seen a vision of Lenin, who said to her, "I don't want Stalin next to me in my tomb," after which he was removed.[2]

To me, however, Marxist theory seemed too rigid and entirely unjust to the peasantry. I couldn't bear the thought that the peasants were unable to become true socialists without first being converted into factory hands and undergoing proletarianization. I argued that we would have to educate the peasant to understand his own plight and that this understanding would confirm his own instinctive feeling of communal ownership—of socialism. We also differed on other important questions, such as the role of the individual in history and of terrorism in the revolutionary struggle. My sister rejected terrorism. That made me extremely disappointed in her, and I even began to dislike her, as I did all other Marxists.

By the time I finished the *gimnaziia* in 1905 I had joined a small student cell of Socialist Revolutionaries. I wanted more than anything else to play an active role in the revolutionary movement. I did not want to go on to the university. My university was the revolution! Instead, I went to the town of Borisov in Minsk province to teach in an elementary school and to seek contacts with other SR groups. Meanwhile, a friend of mine from Novozibkov wrote to the SRs in Minsk, where there was a flourishing movement, and told them about me. They soon sent an emissary, a young girl named Rosa Shabat, to invite me to join them. I returned with Rosa to Minsk, and she brought me to the home of one of the SR leaders, Katya Izmailovich, whose father was a lieutenant general in the

[2] At the Twenty-Second Party Congress in 1961.

Far East, taking part in the war against Japan. Her sister Alexandra was then in a St. Petersburg prison, beginning a life sentence for an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Minsk governor, Kurlov.

Katya was a marvelous person—so dignified, so sophisticated, while I was so young and inexperienced. In her mid-twenties and not pretty, she was tall and slender, with smoothly combed brown hair, and always wore the same simple calico dress. She seemed to have some hidden source of energy within her, as well as a very strong will. All of the comrades, even the veteran revolutionists, showed her great respect. I idolized her. I lived with her for two weeks and she taught me many things.

At last the day came when Katya asked me to speak before a group of workers, my first test as a revolutionary agitator. Rosa Shabat brought me to a small smoke-filled room with ten or twelve bakers, and I spoke to them about the revolution. There was a book, a kind of revolutionary ABC, that I had read over and over so I would know what to say. But I was only seventeen, and extremely nervous. I began to talk about revolutionary ideas and programs when suddenly I couldn't remember the book, which I had learned practically by heart. I became confused, upset, and finally began to cry. I will never in my entire life forget my mortification. It meant everything to me to succeed as a propagandist, and if I failed, I thought, my whole life was a failure. But the bakers started to cheer me up. "That's nothing, *baryshnia.* You'll remember. Don't worry." They understood my situation and sympathized with me, and through their encouragement I regained my composure and was able to finish.

On the way back to Katya's house I was afraid to look at Rosa, afraid to ask her what she thought, afraid she would say that it wasn't any good. Yet two days later, to my immense delight, Katya told me that they were assigning the bakers to me as my group. It was a great moment for me—the beginning of my revolutionary career!

I remained in Minsk for several months, carrying out agitational work. During that time I learned from Katya that a split had occurred in the ranks of the SRs, that an opposition group had emerged in Bialystok, a group of young revolutionaries led by Lipa Katz and

Meishka Zakgeim called the *Molodye,* the "Young Ones," who were later to take the name of Maximalists. The Young Ones rejected the parliamentary struggle and partial reforms, and they waged a campaign of terrorism against the police and government officials. They called for a social rather than a political revolution, a mass uprising that would usher in a dictatorship of the proletariat. They distrusted intellectuals in the revolutionary movement and said that the workers and peasants must make the revolution themselves by seizing the factories and the land.

The Young Ones resembled the Anarchists in their revolutionary spirit and their belief in terrorism, but disagreed with them on the question of organization. The Anarchists didn't believe in organization. They didn't believe, as the Young Ones did, in a dictatorship of the proletariat. They refused to accept *any* dictatorship, and called instead for a federation of autonomous communes. The Young Ones, on the other hand, felt that some degree of organization, of centralization, was necessary. They were not much concerned with ideology but they were influenced less by Bakunin than by Lavrov and especially Mikhailovsky, who, in spite of his moderate views, was their main theorist. Like Mikhailovsky, they emphasized the role of the individual, of the human personality, in shaping history. They were also strongly influenced by the revolutionary syndicalists in France, above all by their notion of direct action and the general strike.

The program of the Young Ones struck a responsive chord in me. I talked to Katya about them, and she got word to the Bialystok group that one of her comrades was eager to work with them. Soon afterwards, an emissary came from Bialystok—"Michel," we called him—and told me all about the "opposition" and its activities. Many of its members, he said, had already been arrested, and they needed new speakers and organizers. I decided to go and immediately packed my things.

Katya too was planning to leave Minsk for another destination, and she arranged a little farewell party. Handing me a glass of wine, she said: "This will be our swan song." That was the last time I saw her. The next day she left for Sevastopol to assassinate Admiral Chukhnin of the Black Sea Fleet. Dressed as the widow of a sailor,

she went to Chukhnin to ask for relief. She drew her pistol and fired, but succeeded only in wounding him in the leg. In a fury he ordered his orderly to kill her, and he cut her to pieces with his sword. Her sister, as I told you, was already in prison for an attempt on General Kurlov, and when their father heard the news about Katya he committed suicide.

I was in Bialystok when I heard of Katya's death. It was heartbreaking news, but I continued my agitational work, lecturing to groups of workers and students. The Young Ones, as I said, were intensely anti-intellectual and anti-bourgeois, and at first some of them called me "the *goy*" because I couldn't speak Yiddish, and the "*intelligentka*" or "*beloruchka*" because they detested white-handed idlers with intellectual pretensions. But it was not long before I won their confidence and affection, and we became great friends.

In an effort to expand the oppositionist movement, Lipa Katz, one of the leaders of the Bialystok group and my future husband, went to Ekaterinoslav to organize a group among the factory workers there. Lipa soon sent for me to help him, and we often spoke to the workers at the factory gates, arranged mass meetings on the outskirts of town, and succeeded in forming a small but active cell with about twenty members, nearly all of them of Russian nationality. In Bialystok, which had the first and largest Maximalist group, the membership was mostly Jewish, with a sprinkling of Russian and Polish workingmen and a small following among the peasants of the surrounding countryside. In addition, there were groups in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, and other large cities, as well as one in Yuzovka organized by "Mortimer" Ryss.

In order to maintain and expand our revolutionary activities, "expropriation" became an important part of our tactics. One of the first of these "ex's" was carried out in Kiev under Mortimer's leadership. He was an intelligent but nervous man who moved about as if mounted on springs. He was short and unprepossessing but with bright, burning eyes and an enormous personal magnetism which attracted young radicals to his side. At the same time he was extremely polite and gentle, almost effeminate. In Kiev he organized the holdup of a government courier, but trying to assist a wounded comrade, he was himself captured and taken to prison. Azef had

long wanted to plant an agent in our organization, and he now hit upon Ryss as his instrument. Mortimer pretended to go along, and the police allowed him to escape from prison. But instead of going to St. Petersburg, as agreed, he went south and organized a small group in Yuzovka. It was soon rounded up, however, and Mortimer was hanged.

The principal leader of the Maximalist movement was known as *Medved,* The Bear, a nickname he had acquired during the Moscow uprising of December 1905, in which he played a very prominent part. In contrast to Ryss, he was a handsome young man, tall, blond, and blue-eyed, with a face that radiated vitality. His real name was Sokolov,[3] and he was the illegitimate son of a nobleman and a servant girl. When the split occurred in the SR ranks, he immediately joined the opposition and became its most dynamic leader, organizing a Fighting Brigade (*boevoi otriad*) modelled after that of the parent party. In March 1906, jointly with the SRs and the Bolsheviks, he engineered our first big "ex" in Moscow, which netted nearly a million rubles.

The Bear was constantly preoccupied with devising new adventures. He was the epitome of the revolutionary militant—dynamic, forceful, energetic, an idealist and activist combined. The most famous act of his Fighting Brigade was the attempt on Stolypin in August 1906. Our comrades were dressed in uniforms obtained by Natasha Klimova, the beautiful daughter of a member of the State Council, who had joined the Maximalists while a student at Moscow University. For her the struggle was important in itself, quite apart from the ends which it was to achieve. In revolutionary action she saw the highest beauty, a source of vibrant experience, almost a form of art. The young men threw bombs into Stolypin's *dacha* in St. Petersburg, and several of them were killed, along with more than twenty people in the house, though Stolypin himself escaped unharmed.

[3] Mikhail Ivanovich Sokolov. See his *Sushchnost maksimalizma,* St. Petersburg, 1906. Further sources on the Maximalists during the 1905 period include G. Nestroev, *Iz dnevnika maksimalista,* Paris, 1910; B. I. Gorev, "Apoliticheskie i antiparlamentskie gruppy (anarkhisty, maksimalisty, makhaevtsy)," in *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie v Rossii v nachale XX-go veka,* St. Petersburg, 1910, vol. III, pp. 473-534; and M. M. Engelgardt, "Vzryv na Aptekarskom ostrove," *Katorga i ssylka,* no. 20, 1925, pp. 67-94.

The last of the "ex's" took place in Petersburg in October of 1906. It was carried out on the Fonarnyi Pereulok in broad daylight by a group of Maximalists from Petersburg, Bialystok, and Ekaterinoslav, some of the finest comrades in our movement. They attacked a messenger with government funds guarded by mounted police. One of them threw a bomb while the rest opened fire on the police. The raid netted 460,000 rubles, but at the cost of eight comrades killed or captured.

Part of the money was used to finance the first and only Maximalist conference, which took place in a farmhouse in Finland.[4] More than sixty delegates attended, workers and intellectuals from various cities. I was a delegate from the Ekaterinoslav group. At the conference we officially proclaimed our independence from the SR party and shed the name of Young Ones for SR Maximalists. We also drew up a program that emphasized the importance of terrorist activity. A pall hung over the meeting because of the loss of our comrades in the Fonarnyi "ex." Of the proceeds of the raid The Bear said: "There is blood in every kopeck, comrades. Let's make it all count."

After the conference, the members of the Fighting Brigade met with The Bear in Helsingfors to plan its next move. It was decided, at The Bear's suggestion, to blow up the main police headquarters in St. Petersburg. I was thrilled when The Bear asked me to take part. Natasha Klimova (who was by then The Bear's companion) was to obtain the dynamite in Finland, while Comrade Lukich and I were to smuggle it into the capital. We did this by pretending to be a newlywed merchant couple returning from our honeymoon in Finland. I sewed some of the dynamite into my petticoat, and Lukich fastened the rest to his belt. On the train, however, we were watched by a police spy, and when we got to St. Petersburg we found that our hideouts had been raided the previous day and all of our comrades arrested. Lukich tried to return to Finland but was seized at the railroad station. I was chased in the street and caught just before I could jump into a carriage. Natasha too was arrested the same day, and in prison I found that the cell next to mine was occupied by

[4] At Abo from October 25 to November 3, 1906.

Nadya Terentieva, who had gone to Odessa with Meishka Zakgeim and three other members of the Fighting Brigade to kill the governor there, but were caught before they could carry out the deed.

So I never did kill anybody—though not from lack of trying. And now our entire organization had been smashed. Everyone had been either killed or arrested. The Bear was executed in the police station without trial. The rest languished in prison until June 1908 when a mass trial, the Trial of the Forty-Four Maximalists, took place in the capital. Natasha Klimova was tried separately and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. The news caused her father—a member of the State Council—to die of a heart attack. The rest of us got sentences ranging up to fifteen years at hard labor. I received the lightest sentence, two years with time already served deducted, because of my age and a lack of evidence against me.

While I was serving the remainder of my sentence, Lipa Katz escaped from prison and made his way to Paris. After my release in 1909 I joined him there, and we mingled with a whole colony of exiled revolutionaries—Chernov, Savinkov, Breshkovskaya, Figner, Grossman-Roshchin, Martov, Lenin.

Lipa and I came to Boston in 1914, on the eve of the First World War, and we have remained there ever since. In 1926 I visited Soviet Russia and saw Nadya and Meishka, who had married in Siberia, where they were imprisoned until 1917 when the Revolution gave them amnesty. They were both members of the Organization of Political Prisoners and worked in its book store in Moscow. Natasha Klimova, who had escaped from prison and joined us in Paris, was all packed to return to Russia in 1917 when she died suddenly of influenza. My husband died in 1971 at the age of 88.

So I am the last of the Maximalists, as far as I know. Those who remained in Russia were exiled, purged, executed; those who went abroad have all passed away. They were the greatest idealists, revolutionists of the highest moral caliber. They sacrificed all the comforts of life to serve the cause of freedom, and many chose the path to martyrdom. Yet so much was packed into those few years in Russia—so much of life's excitement, of high ideals and hopes. They were wonderful years, you know. Without them, without those few years, my life would have no real meaning.