

A veteran of the struggle against fascism and Stalinism

Nathan Steinberger celebrates his 90th birthday in Berlin

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On July 16 Nathan Steinberger celebrated his ninetieth birthday in Berlin. He is one of the few former members of the German Communist Party (KPD) who survived the Stalinist prison camps of the Soviet Union and retained their fundamental socialist convictions despite this horrific experience.

His life not only encompasses almost the entire twentieth century, but also closely reflects the tragic experiences of the workers movement during the past era.

The youngest child born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Berlin, Nathan grew up in relative poverty. His earliest impression of the world was defined by war and hunger and the subsequent revolutionary struggles of the Berlin workers. When the First World War began Nathan was four years old; when the Russian Revolution occurred he was seven. Asked about his childhood memories, Nathan Steinberger recalls: “The Russian Revolution had Berlin in a whirl. Everyone was talking about Lenin and Trotsky. Looking back, I can say with certainty that the events in Russia had an enormous effect on life in Berlin and the whole of Germany”.

Some of the biggest demonstrations and street battles took place in the immediate vicinity of the Steinberger family's home. Nathan's toys were the empty bullet shells he collected on the street during the breaks in armed combat between supporters of the *Spartakusbund* (the revolutionary “Spartacus League,” later to become one of the essential components of the German Communist Party, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht) and the soldiers of the *Freikorps* (reactionary paramilitary organizations). Often, Nathan joined the mass demonstrations after school, and in the evenings he would run away from home to attend the heated debates at political workers' meetings to which he felt magically drawn.

Under the influence of his elder brother Adolf, who was later murdered by the Nazis in a concentration camp, Nathan soon joined the Communist movement. At the age of 14 he became a member of the Communist Youth Federation, and was involved in building the *KoPeFra* (“Kommunistische Pennälerfraktion”—“Communist High School Students Faction”) and the Socialist School Student Federation (SSB), in which he played a leading role.

Nathan also got to know the problems of the German workers movement at a very early age, and experienced its attempt at repeating the Russian Revolution in Germany. Today he looks back to the year of 1923 as being one of great hope and tension among both Communist and Social Democratic workers. There had been strikes throughout the year. “There was a tangible feeling in the air—everyone who was politically aware felt that soon it would happen!” he recalls.

“All of us, the workers of Berlin and the youth, were awaiting the German October Revolution in a fever of anticipation. I sensed that very clearly at the time.” The disappointment was all the greater when the leadership of the German Communist Party (KPD) hesitated so long that they missed the crest of the movement. “One day, I realized it was all over. Suddenly, there was a standstill. I couldn't explain it, but all of sudden the excitement was gone, and disappointment spread. The workers who weren't organized in the KPD were particularly disappointed. There was an oppressive silence for several days.”

In the wake of the struggles that emerged within the Russian Communist Party between Stalin's faction and the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky, conflicts also broke out in the KPD after 1923. Although he was still too young to grasp the political issues, Nathan and his entire local were expelled from the Communist Youth Federation (KJVD) in 1926. The justification given for this was that the local was under the influence of Karl Korsch, a prominent KPD oppositionist who criticized the party line.

Nathan Steinberger remained active in the SSB. He and his friends not only discussed politics, but also organized discussions with writers such as Erich Kästner, Arnold Zweig and others, and also debates on issues of psychology and sexuality. After passing his college entry-level exams in 1929, Nathan first enrolled in the University Medical School in the hopes of being able to pursue his favorite subject, psychology, but then switched to political economy. He specialized in agricultural science, and studied under the famous scientist Karl Wittfogel, who at that time was a representative of the International Agriculture Institute in Moscow.

Despite his previous expulsion from the Communist Youth Federation, Nathan became a member of the KPD in 1928. That year marked the beginning of vehement disputes within the KPD on the subject of the “social fascism theory” advanced by Stalin and his followers. According to this theory there was no difference between social democracy and fascism. The effect of this suicidal policy was to prevent any common struggle by Social Democrat and Communist workers against the increasing influence of the fascists.

Nathan instinctively rejected this position. As he recalls, “This ultra-leftist position was something for the politically ignorant. The vast majority of those who had gone through the revolutionary experiences of 1918 and 1923 rejected the equation of the SPD with the fascists. I, at any rate, never used the phrase ‘social fascism’ when doing street agitation.” It was during this period that Nathan Steinberger first encountered the writings of Leon Trotsky, who called for a united workers front and warned that Stalin's politics were leading to a

division of the working class and playing into the hands of the Nazis.

A short while later the life of Nathan Steinberger was to change dramatically. At the recommendation of Karl Wittfogel, he was appointed to the Moscow Agricultural Institute in 1932, even before he had finished his course of studies. He was accompanied by his girlfriend Edith, who was also an active member of the KPD. Their stay in Moscow was supposed to last for two years, but when Hitler came to power in 1933 there was no way the young couple could return to Germany. Not only were they known as members of the KPD, they were also Jewish.

Nathan and Edith were shattered by the defeat of the workers movement and the victory of fascism in Germany. At the same time they discovered that the Soviet Union under Stalin's regime had nothing in common with the revolutionary optimism of the 1920s that had attracted both of them to politics. At the Agricultural Institute, older colleagues informed Nathan about the terrible and brutal events that had taken place in the rural districts during the course of forced collectivization. He met Old Bolsheviks such as Fritz Platten, a Swiss revolutionary and close collaborator of Lenin's, and experienced how Platten and other old party members were increasingly isolated. At this point, Trotsky's supporters had already been exiled or imprisoned. There was hardly any open political discussion at the party meetings Nathan attended. Party democracy was increasingly smothered by bureaucratism and intrigues.

In 1935, Nathan was awarded his doctor's degree. His doctorate on "The Agricultural Politics of National Socialism" was published, but soon afterwards his scientific work was abruptly brought to an end. In the aftermath of Leningrad party secretary Kirov's murder, the purges began. And not only known oppositionists, but also an increasing number of party members who had hitherto been loyal followers of Stalin fell into the clutches of the Stalinist secret police GPU. Nathan was dismissed from the Agricultural Institute in 1936 and at first tried to make ends meet for his family, which now included a daughter, Marianne, born in 1935, by giving German lessons.

After the first Moscow show trial, the wave of arrests also engulfed the German émigrés who had fled from the Nazis. Looking back, Nathan points out that "Stalin moved against anyone who could be a potential critic of his politics. And he knew that the defeat in Germany was above all the result of his politics."

On the eve of May Day 1937 Nathan was arrested. His wife Edith met the same fate in 1941, at the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Their six-year-old daughter was taken in by a Jewish family they had befriended.

The martyrdom that now began was to last until 1956. Nathan was first incarcerated in the notorious Butyrky prison, and then transported to Kolyma in Siberia. He was charged with "counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activity," his "guilt" compounded, among other things, by his expulsion from the German Communist Youth Federation at the age of 15. His wife was deported to a labor camp in Kazakhstan, where she only just managed to survive.

In Butyrky prison, Nathan recognized that the arrests were not arbitrary. They were primarily aimed at the most devoted party members who had actively participated in the October Revolution. He shared his first prison cell with a son of the Left Oppositionist Zinoviev and with the Old Bolshevik and party historian Vladimir Ivanovich Nevsky, who had been involved in the military preparation of the 1917 revolution as a member of the Petrograd Revolutionary Committee and was minister of transport in the first workers' government under Lenin. Only a few weeks after Nathan met him,

Nevsky was taken from his prison cell and shot.

Unlike almost all of their friends of that time, Nathan and Edith Steinberger somehow survived. Reunited with their daughter, they were allowed to return to (East) Berlin in 1956, but were subjected to absolute silence in the German Democratic Republic. They were not allowed to say a single word about the Stalinist prison camps. It was only after the collapse of the GDR ten years ago and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union that Nathan Steinberger began to recount his experiences under Stalinist terror. Unlike many other survivors of the Gulags, he did not embrace right-wing politics, but remained faithful to the socialist ideals of his youth.

At his birthday celebration on July 16, which was attended by many friends and acquaintances of his younger days and from his time in the GDR, Nathan Steinberger summarized the conclusions he had drawn from his life with the following words: "I want to help young people understand what Stalinism was. Socialism must be rid once and for all of the refuse of falsification and suppression—must be cleansed once and for all of Stalinism. The regimes in the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence had nothing whatsoever to do with socialism."

The *Partei für Soziale Gleichheit* (PSG—Social Equality Party), the German section of the Fourth International, also extended its birthday greetings. A birthday telegram sent by David North, the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, read as follows:

"Your life and that of your beloved Edith have spanned nearly the entire 20th century. The hopes, ideals, struggles and tragedies of that tumultuous epoch have constituted the essential content of your remarkable biographies. You have lived through two world wars, the bestiality of fascism, and the betrayals of Stalinism. Again and again your character and beliefs have been put to the most extreme test. But, *trotz alledem*, you have crossed over the threshold of the 21st century with your integrity intact, your spirit unbroken, and your devotion to socialism undiminished. You, dear Nathan, at the age of 90, are an inspiration and example for us all—and especially for the youth."



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