

Interview With Nathan Spero

His Early Life, Pt. 2

J. So after you graduated from high school, I know that you went to go to college. But what was the first step for you after you graduated? Did you get a job or...

N. ?? get back to high school, I became interested in chess

J. Um-hum.

N. and play every day and entered tournaments. And I ?? was a fair player, not a great player. But chess really absorbed me, and I would take books out and read them. There was a chess club in school and we played and won one prize because I was the best player there. But I wasn't the greatest player. And so then, another thing happened while I was in high school. There was a branch of the Socialist Party, and Sam Friedman, who ran for President subsequently with Norman Thomas, who organized a Socialist Sunday School in that area, Tompkins Street, and he had classes for high school students and he had classes for college students. And I was in the high school group. And there I did get interested, come to think of it, got interested in utopians and in the cooperative movements in England, Rochdale. And we had some kind of social life, and we also had a glee club. At that time, WEVD was a Socialist...

J. radio station.

N. radio station, so Sam Friedman organized a glee club and we'd go down and we'd sing all sorts of songs. Man of them I still remember, though I remember telling me, "Nat, don't sing too loudly."

J. So you mean, I shouldn't ask you to sing one of the songs that you remember?

N. Well...

J. Could you please give me a little sample?

N. Actually, later on when I went to... Actually, at... at the IRP (Institute for Retired Persons, New School for Social Research), I went to a class in voice training and a woman told me she was surprised that they treated me as a monotone because she put me through the pace... paces, from low to high notes, and I followed them. I still was not a great singer, but...

J. Uh-hum. But it took you until your retirement to disc... to discover that you actually could sing.

N. Yeah. One of them we sang: (sings) "So we love and honor you, Norman Thomas." He was the hero. And then, there was this... a lot of Union songs. One of them was: (sings) "Organize Unions. Learn to clap together. Keep it up until the job is done. You tell them..." And a third was, well, still part of this "Now and then, you tell... you meet men who tell you it don't pay. Don't you join. Save your coin, and you'll be rich someday. Starve and save forever,

if you're a working man. Unless you build your Union strong you'll end where you began. So organize Unions..." etc. etc.

J. So how did you get interested in this Socialist club, this group?

N. Actually, through my sister, who somehow had formed contacts, and she told me it was there and brought me down until I became interested. And Sam was a very nice person. He had a place on 14th Street, near Eve Le Gallienne's theater (1926 – 1935). And I don't know if you've heard of her;

J. I have.

N. very inexpensive theater,

J. Uh-huh.

N. I used to go to. And he had this place. He worked as an editor for Women's Wear. And during the Depression days, and he made a big salary there; hundreds of dollars a week. And so, he was well off. But he shared his riches, and he had this beautiful, large studio apartment, lined with books on all sides. And people from the Socialist movement, young people, would come there and would meet and go to dinner together, to do things together. His room was a meeting place and he tolerated it. Actually, there was a sort of balcony around the top that was his private domain he'd go to.

J. Uh-huh.

N. But that was a wonderful experience,

J. Uh-hum.

N. to be involved with that.

J. And what attracted you to the ideas of Socialism and utopia? What did you find in that was attractive to you?

N. Well... we or... As I pointed out, the background was a background of poverty, and under capitalism and exploitation, in those days, people were... were poor. And some people were wealthy, so that was a form of Socialism. I learned, of course, that people should live together; that there should be industrial democracy on the job where people can together, help run the businesses; that there should be worker's cooperatives, production... productive cooperatives, where people get together and work, and also the consumer cooperatives where you buy, according to Rochdale, a group in England, where you can buy food cheaply. And I was very much intrigued by these simple ways of changing the system, that people can work together for common ends. And some people weren't too rich and some weren't poor.

J. U-hum.

N. So that's what attracted me to it. In addition, I got attracted to it by the social aspects of it: Sam Friedman... they had somebody called Vivian... Wayover Levinson, who's still alive, incidentally, was his... his helper, and they made it attractive. The Socialist Party, for example,

had some wealthy friends who had beautiful estates and they'd work it out so we'd go out and visit them.

J. Uh-huh.

N. And they didn't seem to think it was a contradiction, because these people were helping them, were a part of the Socialist movement even though they were well-to-do.

J. Now did you ever see Norman Thomas? Did you ever go to hear him speak?

N. The truth is, I don't think

J. Yeah.

N. I ever went,

J. Uh-huh.

N. or ever heard him speak. But we learned a lot about him at the Socialist Sunday School.