

Interview With Nathan Spero

His Early Life, Pt. 3

J. Now, when you graduated from high school, what did you do then?

N. By that time, my mother had also died,

J. Oh!

N. and I think I was seventeen roughly, and my brother was thirteen. But my sister, my youngest sister, who was somewhat older than I am by that time, had gone through Teacher Training and had qualified to take teaching exams, and she passed and got high up on the list.

J. Yeah.

N. And if you had got a job like that during the Depression, it was like striking it rich, you know.

J. Right. Civil service and good pay and benefits.

N. Civil service and good pay and vacations and benefits. So she supported my brother and me. And...

J. And you lived with her?

N. And we lived with her for a while. My sister Mildred, the next daughter, lived with us too.

J. Uh-huh.

N. But she found some man and married him and moved away. So we lived with my sister, to who I am greatly indebted because she made it possible for me to go to college. And we moved then. We'd moved a couple of times in between, but then, we moved to Bath Beach, which is an area adjacent to Bensonhurst, I think it's east of Bensonhurst, and fronted on Gravesend Bay. And it's a narrow piece of land. We moved there. My... My uncle lived near there and we thought it would be nice to be there. And we thought we'd move into a frame house, but the movers said that the piano that my sister played would tear down the frame, if we tried to hoist it up. So we moved to another place in a more modern building where her piano could be pushed into it without any trouble and in that area, when I first got out of high school, I went to work for a year or more, I'm trying to place things, and...

J. What year did you graduate?

N. After... After I graduated... After I graduated from high school, my mother was still alive for that year or so, and I went to work. And I worked for a... a clothing manufacturer, well known. If I heard it's trade name...

J. Not Hart, Shaffner and Marx? No.

N. No. This was a... These were actually shirts.

J. Okay.

N. And they were trying to... They had a mind to train me to do more of the work there. But there wasn't very much to do, to begin with, and I think they finally decided they could do without me. There was one place. Then I got a job as a shipping clerk in the offices of a man who set up circulating libraries in department stores in New York and throughout the country. And he had developed a system for taking book jackets and putting a cellophane covering over them, and then would paste it back onto the book. So the book always looked new because the cover never got tattered. And he would buy books from reviewers... I remember going up to Clifton Fadiman's house and bringing back with me a bunch of books we'd pay half price for. And he would also work with remainders. And I had to pack the books up in wooden cartons and nail it shut, and use a... one of those carts to bring the books down to...

J. A hand truck.

N. Hand truck, to either a post office... it must have been a post office. And he liked me. He thought I was an efficient worker. But then there was a strike of the ship... of the elevator operators. We were in the forth floor, and I wasn't going to use.... I think you read that in one of my memoirs, I wasn't going to use that elevator. I wouldn't. So he got them to open...

J. That was in the '30s?

N. It's in the '30s,

J. U-hum.

N. just after I got out of high school. He had to do it himself. And so....

J. That was the end of a promising career.

N. he got disenchanted and he brought somebody else in, a young fellow,

J. A strike breaker.

N. and that fellow, well, he brought this guy in afterwards, so... and he apparently, was going to train this young man to go out in to the field and set up the library. And so, eventually, I was fired. And... And in my memoirs, it said that it's too bad there was a strike. Otherwise, I might have been the Spero in Barnes and Noble bookstores. Then, I got a job working in another working factory in Brooklyn. I think it was called Columbus – what do you call these things that... compact company. They made compacts.

J. Uh-hum.

N. for this company. And I handled the metal working press.

J. So you were stamping the compacts out?

N. Right. I was stamping the... the shapes of the compacts. I think I got \$10.00 a week. The minimum wage law had just been passed.

J. U-hum.

N. and after six months, they raised me to 15, and I thought it was because of my ability. But I found out that the law itself had provided for some automatic increases.

J. Uh-hum.

N. And that was a metal working shop that was Unionized that later joined the UE. And this was in the early '30s. It must have been about 1935.

J. Uh-huh. So were they part of that metal workers group that... that was...

N. Some of them... I think they were part of ?? metal workers group.

J. Yes. Yeah. Uh-hum.

N. And later, when I got my job in the UE in 1944, I was able to tell the officers that my service was as long as theirs because I wanted it to date... date back to 1935.

J. Uh-hum. And so, how many workers were in that plant about?

N. It was a... it was a diverse group, you know, Hispanics and blacks. There must have been about fifty or sixty people.

J. Uh-hum.

N. And some people were doing cutting of the metal, shaping... There were all sorts of activities going on around that operation. I don't remember why I left. But there are things that took place that I was doing during the same period of time, outside of working. One of them was that there was a branch of the American League Against War and Fascism that met in the neighborhood; actually met in a little schul in the Bensonhusrt area, and I be... I was attracted to that, 'cause I was a... (machine is turned off and on again)

J. So...

N. I was attracted to it because by that time, the... this process was developing in Europe ?? and we were set up in order to arouse the country to the ?? of fascism. I was in a local branch. They had branches throughout the country that...

J. Who was the league set up by?

N. I... I really don't remember. I think it was a mixture of various progressive forces, including Communists and some Socialists and others, but they had nothing to do... I should remember the people on the Executive Committee in the material they sent out, but I don't.

J. Uh-huh.

N. I must tell you that. And...

J. So what kinds of activities would you do?

N. Well, it was a mixture of activities. We had speakers. We... we put on plays.

J. Did you write the plays?

N. One of our members, called Arty Ama, who worked as a master of ceremonies, wrote a play which was very much influenced by *Waiting for Lefty*. Remember that?

J. Yeah. Clifford Odetts.

N. Clifford Odetts, a similar play.

J. Uh-huh.

N. And by that time, I had become the head of the League. The people who were there... some of them were teachers and they were afraid that we might have a Communist tinge, and they weren't sure... they don't want their jobs, so they didn't resign but they ducked out of playing prominent roles. So I became the Chair. And Arty Ama, at this point, and he put me in a heading role, and I was supposed to sit with my... with a gag in my mouth and my hands tied behind my back, resisting the reactionary employers. But we also put on some very good plays. One of them: *Bury the Dead* by... I can fill these names in. I... I don't know why I'm... but it was a very good anti-war play...

J. Uh-hum.

N. ...a one act play. And there was a play that we put on with the Jewish Community Center in... in the heart of Bensonhurst where we... we got people with background to put on a real, full length play: *Square In The Circle*. I think the play was written by Capayer, and it dealt in a humorous way with the problems of working people and their families in the Soviet Union. It was a comedy. And we made a lot of money on that one.

One of the things that happened while I was Chair was that Lowes Oriental began to show film, newsreels, which were part of the ?? in those days, sympathetic to Nazism. William Randolph Hearst went abroad there, met with them, and the news reels showed him with them. And he said, "They're well meaning people. There's nothing to fear." So we organized a picket line, I did anyway, around the Lowes Oriental, when he came. And it's a crowded neighborhood, and crowds of people gathered. And the police came and they arrested us. One of the policemen was a man we had been friendly with in the... in the ordinary day-to-day events, we used to kid with him, and so on. But when somebody I was very friendly with, who also had been arrested, went up into the Black Maria, this policeman hit him in the back of the head with his billy stick, and Norman Ross was his name, never recovered from that, and he died early. Just a plain piece of brutality, 'cause he was hit from behind. And all we were doing was peaceful... picketing peacefully. So we went to jail overnight.

J. Were you passing out any kind of a flyer with information?

N. I'm sure we were.

J. Yeah.

N. I'm sure we were.

J. Uh-huh.

N. We... with a picture of Hearst and the Nazi officials, you know, and some information on any... We were doing that too.

J. Uh-huh.

N. And they released us on bail. I think the International Labor Defense, the ILD,

J. Uh-huh.

N. got involved and they provided some bail, and we got out. And then, several weeks later, we went to trial for obstructing justice and or obstructing traffic or rioting, or whatever, and the judge was former Mayor O'Dwyer. I don't think he was mayor. Am I right? And the... We met briefly with the man who counseled convicts. What do they call him?

J. Public Defender?

N. No. I mean... He was a probation officer; right, a probation officer.

J. Uh-hum.

N. This is before the trial. And he said, "Hey, what did you guys do?" –you know? "There's a tremendous hostility around here toward the... towards you." In any event, I was... and labor... ILD guy, the lawyer, asked me to present our testimony because I had... I was the leader of the group. And what happened was, we were sentenced to six months probation. We weren't jailed.

J. Uh-hum.

N. But we had to go and see the probation officer. He says, "It was a miracle that you guys got out. I thought they were going to get you." But he was friendly,

J. Uh-huh.

N. ...and we chatted with him; asked the questions a probation officer does. And that was the end of that.

I'll tell you another dark secret of my life that took place during the same period. At college, we were involved at Baruch, ... the 23rd Street East part of the City College, there was a thing called the New York School of Industry and Commerce that was part of the City College.

J. Uh-hum.

N. It's only later that it became Baruch College, and independent... And we had a group at Baruch College that was in opposition to the Deans and President Robinson. We were opposed to the War, and... we would stage joint demonstrations with City College uptown. We were very hostile to Robinson, and we would meet with Dean Gotchal, who tried to persuade us that we ought to take it easy and not cause so much trouble. It's getting on our record and that I'd be better off without it. But we were radicals, at the time. And I had been this member of this YPSL group, Young People's Socialist League, with Sam Friedman. And just about that time, Ramsey

McDonald, who was head of the Socialist Party that was ruling in... in England, came to appeal with the Tories. They set up a joint government to meet the problems of the recession and... and workers' unrest. In other words, in our eyes, Ramsey McDonald was selling out the working class.

J. Uh-huh.

N. And so that caused me to say I'm not a Socialist, and I became a member of the Young People's Communist League, at that time. And eventually, while it was still called YCL, and ?? progressed, and the Communists became interested in the fight against Fascism. They... Under Browder, they tried to change the Party's face and make it one more in tune with an American way of thinking instead of a group that took orders from Moscow and followed the tune... followed the Party line.

J. Twentieth Century Americans.

N. So, you know... so I helped organize and became Executive Director of a very large group of about two hundred young people who met in the IWO's office in 86th Street, in IWO's headquarters. I think it was 86th Street. And we carried out all sorts of activities. In the May Day parade, we first had a parade along 86th Street in the Bath Beach ???. I organized I, and I was the head of it. And...

J. What kind of response did you get?

N. ...the police sergeant came around to visit. He said, "Gee, you come from here. Teach... Your sister is a teacher. What are you getting involved in this sort of stuff for?," because you have to apply for a permit. And they laid out the line for a permit, but it was off the City... major City... So we had about two hundred people marching along Bensonhurst. They wanted us to turn up 29th Street. But instead, I turned down Bay Parkway, which was the major drag. And nothing happened, and people... you know, neighborhood demonstration. I don't know where else things like it were held. But then we got a district, Coney Island and Bath Beach demonstration at Hawthorne Field ??, near Coney Island. That was a place... I don't know who owned it, but soccer teams play there; other, I guess, people would hire it. And the Party in that area hired it, and there was a very large turn out, thousands of people, and I was chosen to hold the banner for the Young People's Communist Section of that. So they were exciting days.

J. Were you doing strike support also? Were you doing any activity around CIO activity or...

N. That was still before... I can't quite get my dates straight.

J. Uh-hum.

N. 'cause these things seemed to be happening all at the same time, you know, the Young Communist League...

J. 'Cause I know that some people involved in YPSL were doing like support for the 1934 Textile strike and the different...

N. We would do things like raise money, and sing songs, and ... and Sam would make appeals over WEVD in support of striking groups. But in my YPSL days, you know, I was in my early teens.

J. Uh-huh.

N. so we didn't do much of that. In my Communist days, you know, I worked in this... as a shipping clerk and of course, I supported the strike and got fired for that reason. So we did have support of that kind. And we distributed a newspaper, a monthly newspaper, called *The Champion of Youth*. And the way we sold most copies was to ride the trains, west end trains, and put copies of the newspaper on peoples' laps and say, "Are you for or against Fascism? If you're against Fascism, buy this newspaper;" shame people into do it. But we ?? that group, two hundred people. And I would get monthly ?? of thou... sell thousands of these damn things. And this became so... such a problem, you know, that I'd wear myself out with that group of young people. And they would be doing it too. We wore ourselves out selling that damn *Champion*...

J. Successful...

N. *Champion of Youth*, meeting the quotas. So ?? in my college days.