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A PERSONAL LOOK AT AMERICA'S FOREMOST COMMUNIST

BY LAURA BROWDER

THERE IS NOTHING QUITE LIKE THE EXPERIENCE of being in the beautiful, sunlit special collections reading room on the top floor of Bird Library—especially when one is about to dive into 86 meticulously cataloged boxes of family history. I was there to do research for a documentary about my grandfather, Earl Browder, as well as a joint biography of him and my grandmother, Raissa Berkmann Browder—a task that was almost overwhelming to contemplate.

After all, my grandfather Earl Browder was the head of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) during its most influential period—the Great Depression. He coined the slogan “Communism is 20th-century Americanism.” He ran for president twice against Roosevelt and appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1938. In 1946, on Stalin’s orders, he was expelled from the Communist Party for revisionism. During all of these years, he was tracked by both the FBI and the KGB, and in the mid-1990s, the VENONA project was published—a series of KGB cables that named my grandfather as a Soviet spy.

During the 1960s, when my grandfather was in need of funds, he sold his papers to a rare book dealer, who in turn sold them to Syracuse University. When I got there, archivist Paul Barfoot, who had just spent two years meticulously cataloging the collection, took me back into the stacks to see my grandfather’s library. I had an unsettling feeling as I browsed the titles, many of which—history, current events, and fiction—were on my own shelves at home.

Although I knew many details of my grandfather’s life, visiting the archive was a revelation. I knew he had been born in 1891, the eighth child of a Wichita, Kansas, family. Forced to drop out of school at age 10 to

help support his family, he became active in the labor movement, and then became an outspoken opponent of World War I—for which he and one of his brothers spent two years in Leavenworth prison for failure to register for the draft. Yet for me to find a faded typescript of a poem their father had written, marking the occasion of his sons’ first day in prison, made it all personal.

My grandfather led an amazingly eventful life. While in Moscow in the mid-’20s, Earl met my grandmother, Raissa Berkmann, in a training program for future Communist leaders. He spent the next seven years in a commuting relationship with her, traveling between his party work in Yonkers, my grandmother in Moscow, and a war in China, where he took part in the struggles between Chiang Kai-Shek and the Communists and became close friends with Zhou Enlai.

My father and one of his brothers were born in Moscow, and they and Raissa eventually joined Earl in the United States in the early 1930s, where he worked closely with writers like John Dos Passos, Lillian Hellman, Richard Wright, and Dashiell Hammett, as well as Hollywood figures like Paul Robeson. However, his attempts to distance the American party from Soviet-style Communism led to Stalin ousting him in 1946. During the 1940s and ’50s, he was in and out of prison, and was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, while the U.S. government attempted for 15 years to deport my grandmother back to the Soviet Union—an effort that ended only with her death in 1955, following a seven-year battle with cancer. Earl Browder, who struggled to rehabilitate his public reputation following his ouster from the party, died in 1973.

Laura Browder, the Tyler and Alice Haynes Professor of American Studies at the University of Richmond, is an author and documentary filmmaker. In March, she visited campus and gave a lecture and mini-seminar on her grandfather as part of the 2012-13 Ray Smith Symposium, Positions of Dissent.



In the archive, the personal and the world-historical share space. A message in the calligraphy of Mao Zedong helped me understand Earl's strong ties to China. A folder full of handwritten letters from my grandmother detailed the harsh living conditions she and their sons endured in the Moscow winters, but also gave evidence of her hope and idealism, offering a window into a marriage that endured his 14-month imprisonment on federal charges in the early 1940s and her own health and legal struggles.

Many of the photographs in the collection detail remarkable events and people of the 1930s. Yet in box 80, between some photographs of Earl on the front lines of the Spanish Civil War, accompanied by members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and a photograph of my grandfather with labor leader Ella "Mother" Bloor, there was one with a name I did not recognize, filed along with a note addressed to "Comrade Browder" from Evelyn and Alvin Averbuck, a couple from Flushing, New York. "We failed to send you an announcement of Earl's birth on May 20th, which happens to be the birth of our favorite American—you. But a little belatedly we are proud to send you a picture of your namesake with the hopes that he and his parents will be able to live up to the inspiring leadership that you and the National Committee are giving to the Party and the Working Class of our country."

Signed "Comradely yours," this letter accompanies a snapshot of their new son. In the portrait, the rather large-eared Earl, perched on a flowered chintz pillow, gazes open-mouthed at my grandfather's book *What Is Communism?*, which a helpful adult hand is holding up

for his scrutiny. It's hard to know what he is thinking. Yet this serene baby seems far removed from the swirling undercurrents of history, a great reminder that the world of American communism included not just indictments and protest marches and doctrinal disputes, but also silly baby pictures sent by parents whose faith in the working class, and the leadership of my grandfather, seemed unlimited.



The Earl Browder collection at SU features numerous items of intrigue, including a message in the calligraphy of Chinese leader Mao Zedong (facing page). Browder and his wife, Raissa Berkman Browder (top photo), met in Moscow. Their family lived in the Soviet capital for several years before moving to the United States in the early 1930s.