

Red Father Seen Through the Eyes of His Daughter

June 24, 2014

Tova Beck-Friedman. *"Red Father"* A 55-minute documentary film. DVD's can be purchased at: http://tbfstudio.com/red_father.html

Tova Beck-Friedman, producer of several films, has created a fascinating documentary about, Bernard Ades, a Communist Party cadre, that leaves the viewer admiring both the filmmaker and Ades' loving daughter Janet Ades. Janet, a central figure in the film, is a critical observer of her father and his friends and from young adulthood an independent person capable of pursuing her own course, even when that meant conflict with her father.

The film—a photomontage of short readings from FBI reports, historic footage, old newsreels, excerpts from TV news shows, newspaper clippings and family photos, as well as interviews with Janet Ades, with Bernard Ades' contemporaries, all accompanied by appropriate music—has a strong narrative line that carries the viewer through Ades' political career and finally brings us in the end to the conflict between father and daughter. I should give a spoiler alert here. Fearing that many may not be able to see this film because it is not being widely shown, this review provides a summary of its content, though it cannot capture the immediacy of the photos and historic film footage that give this documentary its vitality.



Bernard Ades, Attorney for Uell Lee

Bernard Ades, a Jewish lawyer from Baltimore, was one of those men and women who formed the cadres of the Communist Party in the period from the late 1920s to the 1960s. Particularly in East Coast cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, but above all in New York, a large number of them were Jews, immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Their own experience of discrimination in Russia and then in the United States, as well as the exploitation that many experienced in the American workplace, led many into the labor unions and into the Socialist or Communist Party. Bernard, whose father was born in Russia in 1880 and who himself was born in 1903, was one of these.

In Defense of African American Civil Rights

His father was the proprietor of the first Jewish-owned bank in Baltimore, and his wealthy family, which had always expected him to become a lawyer, sent him to Law School of the University of Maryland and then to Johns Hopkins to study economics. Following the Crash of 1929 and the coming of the Great Depression, Ades like a good many others at the time, joined the Communist Party attracted to its ideal of economic and social equality. As an attorney, he began to work for the Communists' International Labor Defense as part of the party's anti-lynching campaign. He spent much of his time in the African American community encouraging black people to resist segregation and to join the Communist Party. He took on legal cases of African Americans who had been accused of serious crimes and who in some cases faced the possibility of execution.

Early in his career, in 1933 and 34, Ades represented Uell Lee, better known as Orphan Jones, an indigent African American accused of killing a white family of four near the town of Berlin in the Eastern Shore of Maryland where Jim Crow was still in effect at the time. Beck-Friedman has Joseph E. Moore, a former state's attorney for Worcester County, Maryland and author of *Murder on Maryland's Eastern Shore : Race, Politics and the Case of Orphan Jones* help to tell the story.



A Communist Party rally for justice for Uell Lee

Lee had worked for the family as a handyman and had been let go, but because he felt he hadn't been paid fairly, he got into an argument with the family. A few days later the four bodies were found. Lee was arrested and given a court-appointed attorney. The local white community wanted a fast trial, a conviction, and capital punishment, but Ades fought for a change of venue out of hate-filled Worcester County. A local official called Ades a "busybody Communist Jewish lawyer," thugs beat him up, and there were attempts to lynch both Lee and Ades, who was saved when a judge hid him in the jail. The Lee case also appears to have led to lynchings in other Maryland counties, apparently because of anger that Lee had not been immediately tried, convicted, and hanged. Ades nevertheless stuck with the case and succeeded in having the venue moved out of the County, succeeded in getting an integrated jury of white and African American jurors, and won widespread publicity and the support of the African American community. He won the precedent requiring that African Americans be chosen for jury panels, an historic victory in Maryland. In the end Lee was hanged and charges were brought against Ades for conduct unbecoming a lawyer.

Ades was ordered to show cause in Federal Court why he should not be debarred. He was successfully defended by Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP. Following the Uell Lee case, Ades ran as the Communist Party candidate for governor of Maryland in 1934 and received 7,000 votes, at the same time giving up his legal career.

To the Spanish Civil War

In 1937 Ades went to Spain to fight fascism as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigades but ended up serving as an officer in the Spanish Republican Army. The Brigades were a front for the Communist Party, or, as Janet Ades says, "Soviet Policy was...a Popular Front that didn't proclaim it was Communist, but pretended it was populated by all kinds of Americans of any political persuasion—but the truth was it was the Communist Party. Communists were, to say the least, unpopular in the United States, were considered anathema by many, and they [the Communist Party] perceived the word 'Communist' as the kiss of death among the American people, and they therefore hid it, even though it was true."

In Spain Bernard Ades was a Communist cadre, "one of the Communist elite," says his daughter. He was both a political commissar and a military officer, rising to company commander, in the Spanish Army. Janet Ades adds, "As Commissar Bernard was responsible for political correctness in his company." The Soviet Union and Spanish Communists and their allies in the International Brigades defended the Spanish Republic against what they saw as the menace of revolution by anarchists and what they characterized as the "Trotskyites" of the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM). Though Janet Ades doesn't go there, as Spanish anarchists and the POUM have argued since the 1930s, and as has been confirmed since the opening of the Communist International archives in Russia, such Communist cadres worked with the Spanish Communist Party and the Soviet GPU to assassinate anarchists, POUMists, and other leftists.[i]

When he returned from the Spanish Civil War, Bernard Ades got a job with the United States Housing Authority in Washington, D.C., but Congressman Thomas D'Alessandro succeeded in driving him out of that job. The family moved to the Sholem Alechem Houses in the Bronx which had been built by the Yiddishists. Janet Ades says it was, "Safe, secure, and 99 percent Jewish; the lingua franca was Yiddish." Most of the residents, she says, were Socialists or Communists, and, as a neighbor says, "They were at each others throats' from the beginning."

The rise of Nazism led to a growing threat of war in the late 1930s. While the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 led many Communists to leave the party, Ades thought it was a stroke of genius, winning the Soviet Union time to prepare to deal with the inevitable attack by the Nazis. With the outbreak of World War II, the family followed the fate of the Soviet Union in the war, putting pins in a map to show the progress of the USSR in taking territory in Eastern Europe. During the war the family contributed clothing to Russian War Relief. After the war, her parents and other Communists, says Janet Ades, never talked about the Jewish Holocaust. They never even talked about their Jewish family members killed in the Holocaust, says Ades. All they talked about was how many people Russia lost.

The Cold War and McCarthyism

Throughout his adult life Ades had been followed by the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover personally ordered him to be spied upon after he returned from Spain. By 1948 the Cold War had broken out and Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin and other politicians heading up Congressional investigating committees were demanding that Communists be ferreted out of their government jobs. The media and private parties also got into the act, denouncing Communists not only in government, but also those working in the private sector. Walter Winchell of the *New York Daily Mirror* and the *Washington Post*, used his very popular radio show to denounce "dirty Communists," including one day Bernard Ades of Maryland. The result was that Ades, who had been working as a public accountant, lost all of his clients. Finding it very difficult to make a living and support his family, Ades told his daughter that he actually considered moving to Israel. Eventually he found foreign companies from Scandinavia that were willing to hire him to represent them.

Bernard Ades continued throughout these years to be active with the party, always loyal to the

Soviet Union and an apologist for Stalin. By the time she was an adolescent, Janet Ades understood that her family mostly socialized with other Communists and only trusted other Communists. Among Bernard Ades' party responsibilities was being in contact with representatives of the Soviet Union. The FBI and the Internal Revenue Service went after Ades in 1958, charging him with tax fraud, when they discovered that he had briefly put \$50,000 belonging to the party in his own bank account. But he succeeded in proving that the money was not his and had only been parked in his account for a day or two. He gloried in having beaten the FBI.

While her father was a pillar of the Communist Party, Janet Ades found herself on the outs after her Communist boyfriend who had been to a Communist World Youth Festival in Hungary in 1956 asked questions about why there were so many troops in the streets. "His attitude was noted and an inquiry came back to the United States about him. He was now persona non grata." Her continued friendship with the young man put Janet Ades "in very poor graces" with the party. Her friends, all members of the party youth group, shunned her. Her father quit discussing political matters with her, "so much so that I wondered if he loved me." She was called in for a discussion with party leaders and was dropped from the Communists' teenage club while her father arranged for her to be sent to a political rehabilitation group.

The study group brought in the "current Soviet nonsense," as she says, the "cockamamie theory" that American democracy was not a democracy, but rather a repressive system of social control, something called "social fascism." But she said nothing and shortly thereafter, no longer a pariah in her community, was invited to join the Communist Party. She didn't want to because the party because it was "dogmatic" and she "didn't want to be under its discipline." "I was afraid of them," she says. She found the situation "impossible." She refused to join the party, but neither did she decline. Her father, appalled, refused to speak to her about politics for several years.

Janet Ades ends by stating: "I loved my father and I admired him enormously. He had courage, he was brave. And he was savvy, but his loyalty to the party was not consonant with his savviness. So that seems to me a shame. I also have great sympathies for the ideals he had and that the party had, of equality and of social responsibility for one another. I think we are responsible for one another, or should be. But those ideals were poisoned by the way the Soviet Union behaved and by the way the Communist Parties internationally bowed and scraped to the Soviet party. They poisoned the well. And that too was very sad, and it also defeated his ideals, those of them that were noble."

Ades, as far as we can tell from his daughter's words, never had second thoughts about his commitment to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. He died in New York on May 27, 1986 and was buried in the Baltimore Hebrew Cemetery.

This well-done documentary will be of particular interest to those who want to better understand the history of the Communist Party of the United States and international Communism, as well as to those interested in American Jewry. As a teacher of college courses in American History, I would certainly use it in my upper division classes. The film which is being independently distributed will be shown in the fall at the University of Minnesota Law School and to the Minnesota Association of Black Lawyers and in the week of November 10 at Baruch College of Performing Arts.

[i] See Harvey Klehr, John Early Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), Chapter 4, "The Secret Apparatus Branches Out," pp. 119- 187.

