Red Rosa: An Intimate Self-Portrait

written by George Fish | July 3, 2011

THE LETTERS OF ROSA LUXEMBURG is the first volume in a projected 14-volume set, *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, of all the extant writings of this great revolutionary socialist in English—all available newspaper articles and speeches, significant polemical and Marxist theoretical writings, and her letters and telegrams, prepared collaboratively by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Karl Dietz Veralg, and Verso Books. *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* contains 230 letters by Luxemburg to 46 different people, and is an English translation by George Shriver of the original German text of 1990, *Herzlichst, Ihre Rosa* (literal translation, *Warmly from the Heart, Yours, Rosa*). The first letter is to her friends in Zurich, Nadina and Boris Krichevsky, in Zurich, dated July 17, 1891 (when Luxemburg was only 20 years old, yet already active in the socialist movement); and the last letter, dated January 11, 1919, is to her friend and comrade Clara Zetkin in Stuttgart, four days before her murder by the proto-fascist Freikorps in collusion with the right-wing Social-Democratic government of Germany headed by Philip Scheidemann and Friedrich Ebert, two leaders of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) who had supported World War I. The significance of Rosa Luxemburg's quite extensive and active correspondence over these years is emphasized well by one of the general editors of the editorial board preparing the *Complete Works*, Peter Hudis. He writes at the beginning of *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, in his "Introduction: Rediscovering Rosa Luxemburg" (pp. VII-XI):

> To get to know Rosa Luxemburg's thought is to get to know a way of seeing the world, and it is not truly possible to grasp that if one lacks access to what is found in her correspondence. (p. XI)

Just before this, Hudis writes appropriately of Luxemburg:

> [F]ew personalities are as engaging and unique as Luxemburg's….She was a deeply analytical thinker who mastered the language and literature of economic theory, perhaps unsurpassed for the Marxists of her generation; yet at the same time she was in many respects an *idealist* in raising questions about the ultimate aims of the struggle for freedom that went beyond the immediate political or economic problems that preoccupied many of her colleagues. As she once put it, "I do not agree with the view that it is foolish to be an idealist in the German movement." She was a thinker deeply committed to a historical *materialist* explanation of social relations; yet at the same time she insisted, "I cannot separate the physical from the spiritual." She was a thoroughly political individual who immersed herself in an array of political debates and controversies throughout her life; yet at the same time she took an intense interest in the natural world, to the point of writing in one letter, "my innermost self belongs more to my titmice than to the 'comrades.'" These statements do not reflect some internal inconsistency in Luxemburg's approach to the world, nor are they opposing determinations resting side by side. They, rather, express Luxemburg's multidimensionality as a thinker and a person—a person and thinker who cannot be neatly sliced and diced into the conventional political or psychoanalytical categories. (pp. IX-X. Emphases in original. Citations from Luxemburg's correspondence omitted.)

In addition, Annalies Laschitza's "Introduction by the Editor of the German Edition" (XIII-XLII) gives detailed information on the correspondence contained in this volume of *Letters*, the history of its preservation during the Nazi occupation of Europe, and the important role played by publication of some of her letters in the renewed appreciation and positive evaluation of Luxemburg, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. (Stalin had put her under a cloud for decades by labeling her a "semi-Menshevik" and calling for a "struggle against Luxemburgism.") Lastly, George Shriver's "Translator's Note" (XLII-XLIII) provides useful information on some of the difficulties encountered in rendering Luxemburg's correspondence into understandable English. At the end of *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* are the highly useful references, "A Glossary of Personal Names" (495-570), "Selected List of Publications (Newspapers and Magazines)" (571-579), and "Abbreviations" (581-582), which will ably guide the reader through the referents given in Luxemburg's letters; and lastly, and I'm sure of considerable interest to the scholar, the "Archive Locations of the Letters" (583-589) listing the archives that house the letters in this volume, which are arranged chronologically. A reasonably thorough "Index" (591-609), along with a total of 802 numbered footnotes, completes the necessary annotation that would be demanded by the serious reader and scholar; Verso is to be congratulated for producing such a scholarly work.

The only things lacking in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* that would be useful to the reader (especially one not familiar with Rosa Luxemburg's personal history) is an outline chronology of her life, which would aid the reader by providing the circumstances under which Luxemburg wrote her letters, and a table of contents listing each letter. Without these, but especially without the outline chronology, the tyro reader (and that would include even persons generally well-versed in socialist history such as myself) can be lost in understanding under what specific circumstances and from what locations these letters were written. (After all, and which becomes immediately apparent to the reader, these are personal, often intimate and casual, letters to friends, comrades and lovers, not political letters as such, or chronologies of events.) It will certainly not be apparent from immediate reading, given the letters' sprightly prose and cheerful disposition throughout, that many of these letters were written from prison, and that Luxemburg spent a significant part of her adult life incarcerated because of her political activities. Even though the dates of her incarceration, as much else that is useful background, are amply contained in the numerous footnotes, it is easy to forget or overlook footnote citations as one is absorbed in reading the text—and the text of Luxemburg's letters is absorbing indeed; she is fascinating as a person, a thinker, and as a gifted writer.

ALTHOUGH ROSA LUXEMBURG WAS a highly political person, her letters are often anything but narrow political commentaries, and this is where her "multidimensionality as a thinker and a person" noted by Hudis comes fully into play: for the vast majority of the correspondence in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* are personal letters to friends and lovers, where the political commentary (which is quite extensive) enters casually, as the shared discussion and understanding among intimates. In this, it is not surprising that she would have active friendships with Sophie Liebknecht, wife of left-winger Karl Liebknecht; Henriette Roland Holst, left-wing socialist in Holland; and Clara Zetkin, leading left-wing German socialist; but Luxemburg is also close personal friends with Louise Kautsky, wife of Karl Kautsky, even though she had broken with him politically in 1910; and with Mathilde Wurm, wife of Emmanuel Wurm, both social-democratic centrists in the USPD. Not that Luxemburg pulls her political punches—for indeed there is much direct criticism of Karl Kautsky and other leading members of the SPD, of the SPD's deadly routinism and lack of imagination, and also an honest assessment of the enthusiastic revolutionary youth who are attracted to the Spartacus League, yet are untried by experience (in this way much like the enthusiastic but untried 1960s New Left youth in the U.S. and elsewhere).[1] And she is highly critical of Lenin in several of these letters. Yet there always remains a civility even in her sharpest criticisms of leading personalities, a determination on her part to separate the ideas that she opposes from the actual persona of the person expressing them.[2]

Further, by certain standards that have been much in vogue for decades on what it means to be "left political," Luxemburg is positively "bourgeois"! She has not only an active interest in politics, she has also an active interest in botany; she takes up drawing and painting, and pursues them eagerly; she loves walking in the gardens of her residence, and in the woods of the Black Forest and in Switzerland; she enjoys without condescension the daily life she observes during her stays in Genoa and Levanto, Italy, and writes of them at length in two letters to Louise Kautsky, dated May 14 (275-279) and June 13, 1909 (279-86). She greatly appreciates Goethe and Mozart, and expresses that appreciation several times in her letters; she expresses regret that while she was at the International Socialist Conference in Paris, September 23-27, 1900, her father died and she was not there;[3] she is an avid reader of the novels of her day and the recent past; she is very fond of her cat Mimi, and often ends her letters with notes of love from both Mimi and herself; and while imprisoned in the Wronke fortress, she befriends and feeds the titmice that come to her window ledge, and she eagerly observes the flowers that grow and the small animals that scurry beneath her cell window.

On "literature and revolution" Luxemburg writes critically of a book she finds "thoroughly dilettantish" in its conception of history, yet says of it,

> It refreshes me tremendously with its lively activity of thought, as well as the enjoyment felt in depicting human fates[.] But for me it's not the person or the book that forms my opinion but the fundamental material of which the book and the person are made. Opinions that are quite wrong don't bother me at all as long as I find an inner integrity, a lively intelligence, and the joy of an artist in painting a picture of the world and of life. (394)

On the other hand, she writes of Romain Rolland's antiwar novel: "Romain Rolland is not an unknown to me, Hanschen. He is certainly one of the white ravens [i.e., a rarity] *intra ex extra muros*[4], one who, confronted by the war, did not fall back into the psychology of Neanderthal times. I have read a German translation of his *Jean-Christophe in Paris.* I don't want to hurt your feelings, but as always I want to be quite honest: I found the book to be very brave and congenial, but more of a pamphlet than a novel, not a true work of art. I am so unmercifully sensitive about such things that for me even the most beautifully written tendentious work is no substitute for the simple and divine quality of genius." (437-438. Bracketed phrase in original.)

Of course there's much that's directly political in the usual left-wing sense in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, much that is insightful, and much that is revealing about the inner life of the socialist parties of Luxemburg's time. But these are scattered throughout the correspondence as *bon mots*, and while integral to each letter in which they are contained, are not a systematic attempt by Luxemburg to formulate her personal letters as political documents and polemics. These letters are, as emphasized before, intensely personal communications for the most part to friends and lovers, and are written as such; the political enters into it because her friends and lovers are themselves also political, so naturally they share in Luxemburg's conversation. But these are personal, not public, documents. And they are also extremely well written, elegant in their use of language as well as exciting in their expression of ideas. The letters within this thick volume show indeed how much we have lost our ability to communicate with the decline of letter-writing; e-mails may be more timely and direct as means of communication, but taking the time to actually correspond (as Luxemburg did throughout her life; she was a devoted letter-writer), to actually compose a letter, produces art as well as communication. And that is at the heart of *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, that is precisely what makes this book so absorbing and so pleasurable to read.

But before we depart, it's only appropriate to discuss a few of the political remarks contained within *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg,* conceding from the start that there's so much here in political content that we can only scratch the surface and point out some things that will be of most interest to readers of this review. First, these letters give us an intimate glimpse into the life of professional revolutionary socialists and the mundane concerns that are part and parcel of a revolutionary's daily life: providing addresses to which to send mail while one is incarcerated or away, as one example; making arrangements for the care of Mimi the cat while Luxemburg is imprisoned, as another; and as the letters to Leo Jogiches show at the beginning of this volume, from March 20, 1893 to July 20, 1898 (3-83), the constant need to provide money to finance the underground Polish socialist newspapers and provide for Luxemburg's living expenses, a need finally attenuated in May 1898, when Luxemburg receives a stipend for writing for the SPD press. This same mundane but necessary concern for money to live on in order to do revolutionary work and writing is also a subject raised in the last letter here, to Clara Zetkin on January 11, 1919 (490-493), where Luxemburg implores Zetkin to move from Stuttgart to Berlin because she's needed for political work, and is promised a stipend on which to live. More proof of how right Engels was when he said at Marx's graveside, "Marx proved that man must first of all eat before he can do philosophy, the arts, etc." Or do socialist work and writing. Same as being an autoworker, or even pushing a broom or serving a cup of coffee: all workers, even intellectual ones, must be able to eat before they can produce.

The correspondence also gives us an interesting look into the personality of Leo Jogiches. He seems to be a quite diffident young man, and in her letter to him of March 25, 1894 (pp. 9-16) she reproaches him for his coldness and preoccupation with politics because she loves him (pp. 9-10); then in the same letter reproaches herself for being so blunt with him, saying, "I am not writing all this as a reproach to you. I cannot demand that you be different from what you are. I am writing partly because I still have the stupid habit of saying what I feel, and partly because I want you to be *au courant* with how things are between us." (12)

When Luxemburg broke off her affair with Jogiches and took up with Kostya Zetkin in 1907, as the letters show, Jogiches became extremely jealous and even threatened to kill Zetkin and Luxemburg. (241; 250-252; 253-54.) There's poignancy in her letters to Kostya Zetkin when their love affair ends in 1909 (285-286). But with both Leo Jogiches and Kostya Zetkin, even though their romances had ended, Luxemburg still corresponded with them civilly and worked with them in the socialist movement. Which is but a demonstration that revolutionaries are human too — or should be.

Rosa Luxemburg was not a feminist in the way it's generally understood now; rather, she was a socialist who viewed women's emancipation as part and parcel of the liberation of the working class as a whole through socialism, and certainly was so actively pro-woman she is justly admired by many feminists today. Her own life can be viewed as a successful feminist vindication of women's power and ability — after all, she climbed to the top echelons of the SPD despite being a woman and a left-winger who early on made enemies within the party; and a Jewish one at that! She writes interestingly on women in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* in two places. In her letter to Hans Diefenbach of April 5, 1917, she writes, "Because either a woman is a true personality — by this I don't mean a so-called 'intimidating woman' but a heart full of inner goodness and firmness, which one can find in a peasant hut as well as in a bourgeois family — because she establishes herself completely and remains a moral victor even when she gives in on small matters. Or else she is inwardly a nonentity —and then once again there is no problem…" (388) Luxemburg writes also this lengthy passage on women in her August 2, 1917 letter to Sophie Liebknecht:

Thus I have already discovered a young woman working here in the [Breslau] prison yard whose slender form and concise gestures, with her head wrapped in a kerchief and the austerity of her

profile, is a direct embodiment of a figure painted by Millet; it is a pleasure to see the nobility of movement with which she carries her loads, and her gaunt face with the unvarying chalk-white complexion reminds one of a tragic Pierrot mask. However, made wiser by sad experience, I try to give a wide berth to such highly promising manifestations. The thing is that at Barnim Street I came across a woman prisoner of truly queenly appearance and bearing, and I thought to myself that there must be a corresponding "interior." Then she came to my part of the prison as an odd-job worker [*Kalfaktrice*], and after two days it became evident that beneath the beautiful mask there lay such a mass of stupidity, such a base mentality, that from then on I always averted my gaze when she crossed my path. It occurred to me then that, ultimately, Venus de Milo could…have earned her reputation over thousands of years as the most beautiful of women only because she was silent. Had she opened her mouth, it might perhaps have come to light that at bottom she was like some women of limited mentality who take in washing or sewing, and the entire charm of her person would have gone to the devil. (p. 430)

In another letter to Sophie Liebknecht from Breslau prison, dated before December 24, 1917, Luxemburg remarks on how the horses that pull the overloaded supply wagons are brutalized by men who are themselves brutalized.

Although Rosa Luxemburg was a sharp polemicist with clearly-defined left-wing views that she wished to freely express within the socialist movement, and chafed when the right-wing bureaucrats within the SDP silenced her, nonetheless, she was not for splitting and fragmenting the socialist movement along ideological fault lines. In her letter to Henriette Roland Holst in August 1911, she wrote on socialist unity and socialist work within the less-than perfect social-democratic mass parties:

> Now I hear: things are going well with you personally and with your health, but you want to leave the SDAP [Social Democratic Workers' Party of Holland]. The first things make me truly happy, but the last one — no! You certainly know I was strongly opposed to your staying in the party at the time when the others left it. I was and am of the opinion that you should all stay together — inside or outside. Fragmentation of the Marxists (not to be confused with having differences of opinion) is fatal. But now, when you want to leave the party, I would like with all my might to prevent you from doing that. You do not want to join the SDP [Sociaal-Democratische Partij of Holland, which later became the Communist Party of Holland], or so I hear. I'm not able to judge whether that is correct or not. If you want to join the SDP but can't, enough said. But then by leaving the SDAP you are leaving the Social Democratic movement! You can't do that, none of us can! We can't be outside the organizations of the **masses**, out of contact with them. The worst working-class party is better than none. And times can change. If a few years a stormy period could sweep away the opportunist muck in Hol[land] or even in all of Europe. But a person can not wait for such times, from the outside, one must carry on the fight within, no matter how sterile or fruitless the effort may seem—to the very end. If you stay outside, you are finished, dead for the political movement. Don't do that! You also have responsibilities toward the International. Stay with the rank and file, that is our duty, we are all soldiers. (310-311. Bold emphases in original.)

But political animal though she was, Rosa Luxemburg could also write as she did to Leo Jogiches on October 20, 1905:

> Yesterday I was very close to deciding, at once, to let it all go fly and *thumb my nose at*

> *the whole world*—this whole *goddamned politics*, or rather this bloody parody of "a political life" that we are leading. It's such an idiotic form of *Baal worship*, and nothing else, in which one's entire human existence is offered as a sacrifice to one's own ruin, a kind of illness of swollen mental glands. If I believed in God, I'd be convinced that God would punish us harshly for [choosing] this *torment* [*Qual*]." (207)

As noted above, while broadly supportive of Bolshevik positions on politics, she was also critical of the Bolsheviks, and of Lenin specifically. Two examples are cited above. A third, expressed in a letter to the *Social-Demokraten* [publication of the Danish Social Democratic Party] on October 13, 1913, accuses Lenin of interfering in the internal affairs of the SDKPiL by sectarian, splitting activity. She tells the editors of *Social-Demokraten* that they are wrongly getting their information on Polish party relations from the

> representative of a Russian Social Democratic faction, Lenin. This faction which for years in Russia itself has systematically sought to split the workers' party and recklessly engaged in faction fighting…has stubbornly blocked all efforts toward unification and thereby has brought the Russian party movement to the verge of ruin.…The Lenin faction and its representatives…blindly support those who cause disruption and disorganization in the Polish Social Democratic Party and thus, with all their might, they cause difficulties for our party—as revenge for the fact that Polish Social Democracy fights with all **its** might against the splitting policy in Russia." (327-328. Bold emphasis in original.)

Rosa Luxemburg warmly greeted the news of the Russian Revolution of October 1917 from her prison cell, although from early on she recognized the difficulties that lay ahead for a revolution in which, "caught in the pincers of the imperialist powers from all sides, neither soc[ialism] nor the dictatorship of the proletariat can become a reality, but at the most [what will come about is] a caricature of both." (473) On the other hand she vigorously opposed Kautsky's opposition to the Bolshevik Revolution on the grounds that conditions were not ripe in Russia for socialism. (440-441) Further, while firmly opposed to the Bolsheviks' indiscriminate use of terror and the suppression of democracy (466-477; and September 30, 1918, (473-4), she argues that "The use of terror indicates great weakness, certainly, but it is directed against internal enemies who base their hopes on the existence of capitalism outside of Russia, receiving support and encouragement from it.…Thus the Bolshevik use of terror is above all an expression of the weakness of the European proletariat" (484-485) In the same letter, Luxemburg offers this optimistic assessment: "This sore spot also can only be healed by the European revolution. And it is coming!" (p. 485) However, perhaps she was more realistic earlier when she acidly noted, "the Social Democracy in the highly developed West consists of miserable, cowardly dogs, who, while looking on calmly, will let the Russians bleed to death." (452) Yet, despite these misgivings on the course of the Russian Revolution,[5] she went on to become a founding leader of the Communist Party of Germany, a revolutionary socialist party dedicated to achieving an October in Germany and Western Europe.

It would be unfair to both Luxemburg and to the reader of this review to end without noting a few salient features of her personal philosophy and outlook, which are amply peppered throughout *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*. To Leo Jogiches she wrote circa July 3, 1900: "One must constantly carry out anew an inner review, or inventory, of oneself, in order to reestablish order and harmony. Thus one must constantly deal with oneself in order not to lose sight, at any moment, of the overall proportion of things, and in my opinion what this means is the following: to accomplish what is useful in life, to bring positive actions and **creative activity** to the outside world." (138. Bold

emphasis in original.) To Louise Kautsky she wrote on April 15, 1917: "[O]nce again you experience something that I believe in firmly: one can only understand people correctly when one feels love for them." (395) And to Sophie Liebknecht she wrote on May 23, 1917:

> My dear little bird, the whole history of human civilization, which according to moderate estimates has lasted some twenty thousand years, is based on 'some human beings deciding about the lives of others'; the practice is deeply rooted in the material conditions of existence. Nothing but further development, an agonizing process, can change such things, and at this very time we are witnesses to one such agonizing transition, and you ask, "What's the meaning of it all?" Your question is not a reasonable one to ask concerning the totality of life and its forms. Why are there blue titmice in the world? I don't really know, but I'm glad there are, and I experience it as a sweet consolation when a hasty *tsee-tsee-bay* sounds suddenly from the distance. (413)

Lastly, word must be given about the 16 pages of photographs contained in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg.* These are a fascinating addition, photographs of Luxemburg and many of her close associates; she speaking at Stuttgart in 1907, attending the SPD Congress in 1905, and with her students at the Party School; photocopies of her drawings and her letters graced with her original artwork; her prison "mug shot," and her cell at Wronke fortress and the harsh anonymity of the outside edifice of the women's prison on Barnim Street.[6] This book, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, has been prepared by Verso Books with care, scholarship and love, a care, scholarship and love that enables us to discover Red Rosa as she herself had limned her revealing self-portrait through words to others over the decades of her all too short life.

One of the tantalizing "What if?" questions of socialist history is "What if Lenin had lived?" With the publication of *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* we can posit a possibly more tantalizing question: "What if Rosa Luxemburg had lived?" Red Rosa, fierce champion of both the working class and democracy, the only one in the world socialist movement who could truly be called a peer of Lenin and Trotsky. Had she lived, might not the history of socialism have been much different? Perhaps; and perhaps infused with loftier, more sublime, less repressive and terroristic ideals. But as Rosa Luxemburg herself would've objected, "Yes, by all means hold on to your ideals; but turn them into reality in the world as it presently, imperfectly, exists."