

ALEXANDER BERKMAN · HENRY BAUER · CARL NOLD

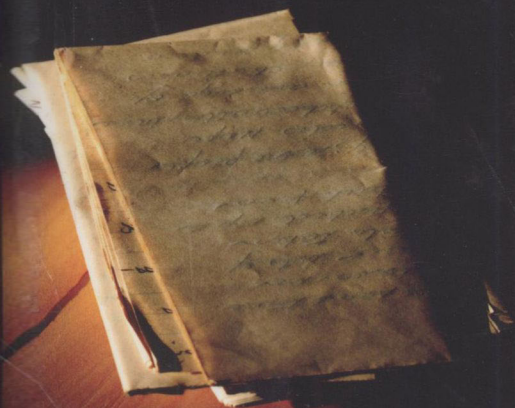
EDITED BY MIRIAM BRODY · BONNIE BUETTNER

# Prison Blossoms

Anarchist Voices from

the American

Past



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AMERICAN PAST

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## Note on the Text

THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS that comprise *Prison Blossoms* are housed in the archive of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, where they are described as “25 copies of a small illegal magazine published by [Alexander] Berkman and two other anarchists.” Included in a collection of Emma Goldman’s papers that came to the International Institute after her death in 1940, the manuscripts were handwritten in German and in English in booklets three by five inches in size, small enough to elude guards who searched the prison cells where, for the most part, they were composed and hidden. The contents of two of the twenty-five documents are identical, except that one was written in German and the other in English after the writers had acquired more facility in that language. The twenty-four separate chapters of essays, narratives, and poems published in this volume are published for the first time in

their entirety, representing the complete collection of *Prison Blossoms* that found refuge in the archive. The remaining documents that originally formed a corpus of some sixty booklets, according to Alexander Berkman's comments in *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, were lost as Berkman, Bauer, and Nold moved from place to place in the United States and, in Berkman's case, moved as a refugee abroad. Frequent searches of and the destruction of papers in the offices of anarchist publications where Berkman worked as a journalist also made their survival unlikely.

The anarchist writers of these manuscripts intended that the documents would form the basis of a larger work on anarchism and prison life in America that they hoped to publish after their release from prison. As they left no record of the organization they had intended for the book, we have placed the documents in a sequence that the contents suggested to us, honoring, we hope, the internal organization of material evident in the reading. For the most part, the English-written text is rendered just as it was produced, the copy having been written in a clear hand remarkably free of editorial deletions and additions. On those few occasions when the writers edited their own work, usually to choose more felicitous wording, their choices have been honored without our indicating that a revision took place. We have corrected minor errors in spelling, punctuation, and wording in the English text and, in a few instances, added a missing preposition or article in brackets, where the addition promotes clearer understanding. We have chosen not to alter occasional errors in the diction of these nonnative-English writers in order to retain a sense of their original voices.

Because the writers composed their texts with some sense of urgency and with a scarcity of paper, they often relied on abbreviations to refer to comrades and friends familiar to them, though not neces-

sarily to us, as well as to refer to place names, titles, and other often-repeated terms. What was a space- and time-saving measure for them can be a source of irritation and confusion for the reader, and we have expanded such shorthand where it seemed advisable and possible. While we have supplied what information we could, we have had to leave some people mentioned in the text with no further identification than what the three authors provided. Some of the essays contain footnotes written by the authors or commentary on the text written by one of the other writers acting as editor. In these cases we have distinguished the comments of the original writers from our own by placing their comments in italic footnotes at the bottom of the page.

We have taken the literal translation of *Zuchthausblüthen* as a title for this work. It is the title that Berkman, Bauer, and Nold had given to their earliest exchanges with each other in their native language. When they began to write in English, they sometimes called their “magazinelet” the *Prison Bird* or *Jail Bird*, using the prison slang for messages sent sub rosa. In his first public appearance, newly released from the penitentiary and workhouse, Berkman gave “To Hell and Back” as the title of the book he and his comrades had written in prison. No mention of these alternative titles surfaces in his *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, published six years later, as Berkman uses the English translation “Prison Blossoms” exclusively in reference to the prison writings.

Excerpts from the diary of Berkman’s last days in the penitentiary, which he never intended to be a part of this collection, are included in an appendix, as a grace note to the years in which he bore witness to his prison experience in America. Two of the essays in *Prison Blossoms* were published separately during the lifetime of their writers. Henry Bauer published a slightly altered version of “A Fateful Leaflet” in *Free Society* on April 17, 1898. In August 1906, Alexander Berkman

published portions of “Punishment: Its Nature and Effects” in the anarchist journal *Mother Earth*.

### A Note on the German Texts

More than half of the *Prison Blossoms* texts were written in German; those by Henry Bauer and Carl Nold were written in *Kurrent*, a nineteenth-century form of German cursive script, those by Alexander Berkman in a Latin script. Transcription of the texts was sometimes difficult, not because their writing was not clear—all three authors wrote in remarkably clear hands—but because of the conditions under which they were written and the wear and tear of the intervening years. Poor-quality paper, water damage, words almost obliterated by rubbing, ink bleeding through from the other side of the paper, crumbling edges, the hand-stitching of the small pages that sometimes encroached on the writing—all of these conditions added to the challenge of deciphering what the authors had written.

The translation of the German attempts to do justice not only to the primary meaning of the authors’ words and expressions but also to the underlying subjective context they wished to convey. They were, after all, not just describing what happened but were also putting a particular “spin” on the events. We have attempted to give the reader some sense of each author’s voice by choosing expressions in English that might reflect the poetry of Carl Nold’s prose, for example, the drama of Henry Bauer’s stories, the elegance of Alexander Berkman’s narratives, and the fervor and conviction of all three. Occasionally, long, complex sentences—more common and more acceptable in German than in English—have been split into more compact units to facilitate comprehension, though most have been left and may in this way give the reader some sense of the author’s associative approach to an idea. We have tried not to beautify or censor



what they wrote nor to change it beyond what is inevitable when one tries to render the thoughts of another. In that sense, every translation is an interpretation, but we have tried to remain true to the reality of the world, the society, and the age they inhabited, as well as to these three men and how they saw themselves in that world.

Bonnie Buettner translated and edited the German texts. Miriam Brody wrote the introduction to *Prison Blossoms* and edited the English texts.

## Introduction

THIS COLLECTION OF DOCUMENTS called *Prison Blossoms* is part of a series of manuscripts written and edited by Henry Bauer, Alexander Berkman, and Carl Nold, all anarchists who were active in the late nineteenth-century American labor movement. The best known of these men, Alexander Berkman (1870–1936), was a prominent and eloquent spokesperson and writer in the international anarchist community, a man who was thrust suddenly onto the public stage in 1892 when he committed, in his words, “the first terrorist act” on American soil, the attempted assassination of steel tycoon Henry Clay Frick.<sup>1</sup>

Never before published, these documents open a window, an American window, to the tumult and turmoil that characterized rapidly industrializing fin-de-siècle Europe and America. From the Paris Commune in 1871 to the bitter labor strife of the American 1880s and 1890s, factories, railroads, and mines, as well as city squares, became

deadly contested arenas of class warfare. In *Prison Blossoms* the contradictions of America's Gilded Age, European social theory, and ruthless monopoly capitalism come together in the secret writings of three jailed immigrant anarchists.

Most of the pieces in *Prison Blossoms* were written furtively from 1893 to 1897, during the overlapping years of the anarchists' imprisonment in Western Pennsylvania Penitentiary. Passing messages from cell to cell via circuitous routes, these comrades risked grave retaliation if their clandestine writing was uncovered and they were perceived to be hatching an anarchist plot. In spite of this risk, the manuscript they completed, composed primarily under the roof of the prison, contained sixty diminutive "booklets," as they called them, each one only three by five inches in size, each concealed under the floor of the prison broom shop after composition, and then mailed to an outside friend by a guard bribed for his service. According to the anarchists' plans, once beyond the prison walls the manuscript was to be held in safekeeping, awaiting the release of Bauer and Nold, who were to promote its publication as a single volume to be called *Prison Blossoms*.

It is difficult to trace the trail of the *Prison Blossoms* writings once they left Western Pennsylvania Penitentiary, or to account for all of the booklets that comprised the original collection. We know that some of them came into Berkman's possession for use in the preparation of his *Prison Memoirs*, the much praised book about his confinement published in 1912, six years after his release from the penitentiary and workhouse, and still in print. Berkman's lifelong anarchist comrade Emma Goldman had rescued some of the booklets from the frequent police raids of her homes and sent them to Berkman when he began writing his *Memoirs*. Carl Nold, Henry Bauer, and others of Berkman's friends had also retained copies that they sent to Berkman. In 1940, twenty-five of the booklets were included

in Emma Goldman's papers when they came to reside in the International Institute of Social History's archive in Amsterdam. More than a hundred years after their composition, many of the *Prison Blossoms* writings are only now reaching the broader public audience for whom they were initially written—an audience beyond the prison walls—in the hope of acquainting readers with anarchism and with the dire conditions inside American penitentiaries.

The authors of *Prison Blossoms*, the Russian-Jewish anarchist Alexander Berkman and German anarchists Carl Nold and Henry Bauer, were imprisoned in Western Pennsylvania Penitentiary for the attempted assassination in July 1892 of industrial magnate Henry Frick, the man they held responsible for the outbreak of labor violence that had attracted worldwide attention at Andrew Carnegie's steelworks in Homestead, Pennsylvania, one of the world's largest steel mills. Sometime early in their confinement, the three men learned they could communicate with one another by speaking through empty water pipes that reached from the privies in their cells to the cells directly above or below. Once a message from one of the men was received, it could be carried by word of mouth from cell to cell along the corridor until it reached its destination. From this primitive telephone system a process began of speaking—and soon writing—to one another that ended in the more sophisticated exchange of essays, narratives, and literary parables that the three anarchists hoped to publish.

In the years they spent together inside the cell blocks, Berkman, Bauer, and Nold exchanged thousands of words, almost all carried as smuggled messages passed from hand to hand to a "rangeman," a privileged prisoner allowed outside his cell whose work was sweeping a corridor or pouring coffee. A message from one of the anarchists might be carried to a workroom, where another of the prisoners, if need be, could move it to a more distant cell block and ultimately

into the hands of one of the other two. In such a way, along with hundreds of other messages about matters trivial and urgent, the plans for writing *Prison Blossoms* were refined. During these long years, Bauer, Berkman, and Nold were never actually in one another's presence. Only once was Alexander Berkman almost near enough to look Carl Nold in the face or to lay his hand upon his sleeve.

Nothing about Western Pennsylvania Penitentiary suggested it might be the setting for a literary and intellectual venture. The penitentiary was a singularly bleak place for prisoners enduring a lengthy confinement. Its long brick cell blocks, enclosed within a perimeter wall, were set on a large tract of land that lay on the banks of the Ohio River, five miles from the center of Pittsburgh. Breezes from the nearby river only sometimes tempered the noxious climate of the penitentiary. More frequently, when the river flooded its banks, the prison cells became damp and malodorous, the floors infested with rats and insects. Only a few years before the anarchists' arrival, the prison administration, notorious for corruption and cruel treatment of prisoners, had been investigated for malfeasance by a state committee.

Nold and Bauer, charged with complicity in the attack on Frick, faced five-year sentences in the penitentiary. Alexander Berkman, who had in fact acted alone, faced twenty-two years and was close to suicidal despair. But with the water-pipe telephone system, which facilitated written messages that were carried by a friendly prisoner called Horsethief, Berkman's spirits lifted. As they debated with each other the political events that had brought them to the prison, the three men recreated the arguments about revolution and strategy that had animated them earlier, in the saloons and cafés of their tenement neighborhoods. Nold, Bauer, and Berkman had come to America with the politics of reform and revolution bred in the social upheaval of their European birthplaces. Once in America, they had

found like-minded men and women who believed an endless enmity was inevitable between the toilers who worked the mills of industry and the capitalists who owned them.

### 1. "Homestead!"

The events that led Berkman, Bauer, and Nold to prison began in the spring of 1892 during the management lockout at Andrew Carnegie's steel mills in Homestead, Pennsylvania, the mills an overlapping set of steelworks on a swath of land alongside the Monongahela River just outside of Pittsburgh. What happened in the Homestead works that year, events that would produce these "prison blossoms," epitomized the volatile social tensions that characterized late nineteenth-century America. In this period, when America was transforming itself from an agrarian economy into an industrial and commercial colossus, rapid industrialization and the presence of cheap labor among the crowds of jobless immigrants fueled disputes between workers and owners, disputes that frequently turned bloody. As fluctuations in market prices, dependent on an uneven demand for raw materials, drove a boom-and-bust economy, workers had no protection against sudden wage reductions or job losses. By the time of the events at Homestead, five state governors had recently called out their states' National Guard: against miners in eastern Tennessee and Idaho, against railroad workers in upstate New York, and against general strikers in Louisiana. But unlike earlier scenes of unrest that may have been unfocused or haphazard, the strike at Homestead was well organized by the powerful Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, a union that had already emerged victorious in two previous strikes.

On July 1, 1892, the prevailing collective-bargaining agreement between Amalgamated and management at Homestead was due to ex-

pire, negotiations for a new contract having begun in February. Encouraged that steel production at Homestead was at an all-time high, Amalgamated asked for wage increases at the outset of its talks with management. Frick, a notoriously anti-union negotiator who was working with the approval of Andrew Carnegie, countered with proposals for wage reductions, including provisions for cuts that would affect vast numbers of Homestead's 3,800 workers. In April Carnegie left for his annual trip to his hunting lodge in Scotland, leaving his steelworks under the management of Frick, who had successfully put down efforts to unionize workers at Carnegie's Duquesne plant a year earlier, where he both broke the strike and fired the union employees identified by company spies.<sup>2</sup> On May 30, Frick delivered an ultimatum to Amalgamated, insisting that if the union did not accept the new contract he would negotiate individually with workers, effectively declaring Homestead a nonunion shop.

The violence that erupted at Homestead would expose the anomalies of Andrew Carnegie's relationship with organized labor and deliver a blow to his reputation as a benevolent industrialist. A world-famous philanthropist and donor of symphony halls and libraries, Carnegie had already arranged to give away his fortune at his death, adhering to principles he had proclaimed publicly in his *Gospel of Wealth* (1889), which held that an inheritance should be passed on to benefit the general community rather than to one's personal heirs. Moreover, he had given public support to negotiating with labor leaders in the past and opposed calling in mercenaries or militias to suppress workers' grievances. At the same time, however, Carnegie the industrialist hoped to control production and profits by adjusting salaries downward while increasing the workday at the furnaces to a dangerous and grueling twelve hours, and by employing the twin processes of horizontal and vertical integration, in which he bought out competitors and also owned all aspects of the production process, from the coal and iron fields to the barges that transported raw

materials to the mills where the steel was forged. Workers blacklisted at Homestead would not find employment elsewhere.

In later years Carnegie attempted to distance himself from Frick's handling of the Homestead strike, describing himself as a retired vacationer at the time, who had been trout fishing in Scotland. But in fact Carnegie had been in continual contact with Frick during the spring months that moved the face-off to a crisis, concerned that his younger colleague, despite his success at resisting the union at Duquesne, was not yet a fully tested combatant in such labor struggles. Frick's mettle proved equal to the fray that developed. With no concession from Amalgamated, by the end of June Frick had closed down the plant, surrounded it with barbed wire strung on top of wooden walls, declared the workers discharged, and locked them out.

With more than two thousand Homestead workers attending its meeting in response to the lockout, Amalgamated mobilized its forces and formed executive and advisory committees to patrol the river stations and the entrances to the town of Homestead. Endeavoring to maintain a peaceful protest and ensure that the first blow would have to be struck by management, Amalgamated took such steps as to warn saloon owners to control drunkenness that might lead to violence. At the same time, the union worked to control the messages sent out to the world, setting up a special committee to meet regularly with members of the press, whose response was largely sympathetic.

Workers at four other Carnegie plants struck in sympathy, as did the mechanics and transportation workers at Homestead represented by the radical labor union, the Knights of Labor. Meanwhile, the locked-out steelworkers and their families were determined to prevent Frick from shipping in replacements on the Monongahela River. A virtual military camp was organized, run by the strike committee; shifts of workers took up sentinel positions along the river and strangers were closely questioned before given entry.

On July 6, 1892, violent conflict broke out. Frick had called in 300



armed Pinkerton guards, an army of professional strike breakers with no ties to the local community that might impede their actions. Under cover of night, the Pinkertons were to travel down the Monongahela to the steelworks, where they would provide security for the replacement workers Frick was recruiting from distant cities and abroad. Alerted to their arrival by telegraph from sympathizers in Pittsburgh, strikers and their families crowded the banks of the river, exchanging shots with the Pinkertons when they attempted to disembark in early-morning darkness. Stranded on barges, the Pinkerton men were bombarded by bullets, explosives, and even firecrackers left over from the Fourth of July. They were set upon by a flaming river-borne raft and a burning railroad flatcar set adrift in their direction, so that some desperate men leaped into the river, terrified of the fire.

Meanwhile, newsmen, having taken up headquarters in town, began telegraphing the story out to the world, which alerted hundreds of steelworkers in nearby Pittsburgh who were preparing to join forces at Homestead. By late afternoon the Pinkertons had surrendered, and by the next day they had been spirited out of town by a strike committee eager to prevent mayhem, the guards only narrowly escaping further retaliation at the hands of the locked-out workers. When the smoke cleared, six steelworkers and two Pinkerton guards lay dead. But more astounding to the workers and their families, Frick's army had suffered a humiliating retreat, forced to run a bloody gauntlet of furious Homestead workers to reach the safety of the sheriff's office. For the moment, it would appear to a sympathetic newspaper-reading public that men, women, even children, defending their livelihoods and homes, had thwarted Henry Clay Frick's attempt to crush the union of iron- and steelworkers.

While the events at Homestead unfolded, Alexander Berkman, twenty-one years old and only four years in America, was working in a lunch parlor hundreds of miles to the northeast in Worcester, Mas-