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Basic biographical data

Name:	Alex Buchman
Other names (bynames, pseud. etc.):	Alexander H. Buchman ; Young
Date and place of birth:	May 16, 1911, Cleveland, Ohio (USA)
Date and place of death:	January 7, 2003, Los Angeles, Cal. (USA)
Nationality:	U.S.A.
Occupations, careers, etc.:	Aeronautical engineer, amateur photographer
Time of activity in Trotskyist movement:	from the mid-1930s (lifelong <i>unaffiliated</i> Trotskyist)

Biographical sketch

Alex (Alexander H.) Buchman was born on May 16, 1911 in Cleveland, Ohio as son of a wealthy family of musicians, intellectuals, and businessmen. He earned a degree in aeronautical engineering from *Case School of Applied Science* at Cleveland, Ohio, in 1933. In view of bad job prospects in America (in 1933 the *Great Depression* reached its nadir) he decided to travel Asia. Thus he first spent some months in Japan but the Japanese authorities regarded him as a communist and undesirable person; they eventually allowed him to leave Japan for Shanghai (China) in August 1933 where he spent the following six years and became acquainted with Harold Isaacs and Cecil Frank Glass, two outstanding Trotskyists from the USA and from South Africa, respectively, by whom he soon got in touch with militants of the Chinese Left Opposition like Wang Fanxi, too.

During his uphold in China Alex Buchman earned his living as an employee of various foreign news agencies. On his way from Japan to China he met a young woman, Debbie Bloomfield, the daughter of a Japanese mother and an Anglican Englishman of Jewish origin. Alex and Debbie fell in love, got married (in the USA, 1941) and maintained devoted to each other until Buchman's death.

During his years at Shanghai Buchman who was a highly talented amateur photographer took hundreds of still photos as well as motion pictures, documents from Shanghai, then an international, multi-ethnic

mega city in turmoil, which in 1937 fell victim to Japanese aggression. Buchman's Shanghai photographs, partly taken by a camera hidden in a special pocket in his jacket with the lens peering out through a buttonhole, mirrored the life of the Chinese population and gave some authentic and alarming impressions of what should soon become bitter reality in other parts of Asia and in Europe, too.

When Alex Buchman had to leave China in 1939 he first paid visit home and then went to Mexico, provided with a recommendation of Harold Isaacs, in order to meet Trotsky and to show him the documentary photographs and films from the Sino-Japanese war. He was warmly welcomed at Coyoacán where he spent some five months, from autumn 1939 til April 1940, in the fortress-like old villa with the Trotskys and with some American, German and French comrades serving as secretaries and/or bodyguards*. Buchman served as a guard, too, and besides this he was charged with the improvement of the technical/electrical security system. Participating in the everyday life at Coyoacán, Buchman with his Leica and with his 8mm Bell and Howell camera took several hundred black and white and some colour pictures of Trotsky, his family, friends, visitors and of other people in or around the house and he took some 55 minutes of motion pictures, too [see also the paragraph *Sidelights...* below]. When he left Coyoacán returning to the United States, Robert Sheldon Harte** replaced him as guard.

From 1942 to his retirement in 1976 Buchman was employed with *Rockwell International* as an aeronautical engineer. It was only in the 1980s that some people became aware of Buchman and his extraordinary photograph and film collection, thus for instance Suzi Weissman*** with whom he developed a true friendship. Together with her, Buchman for example travelled to Mexico again in order to participate in a gathering on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Trotsky's arrival there.

Since the 1930s Buchman who never was officially affiliated to any Trotskyist party or group, regarded himself as a socialist and never gave up admiring Trotsky. He maintained (or renewed) friendly and close relations to many (ex-)Trotskyist veterans and with some of them he had a lively correspondence, as for example Wang Fanxi (1907-2002), Baruch Hirson (1921-1986), Albert Glotzer (1908-1999), Esteban (Sieva, Vsevolod) Volkov, Harold Isaacs (1910-1986), Cecil Frank Glass (1901-1988), Jake Cooper (1916-1990), George Novack (1905-1992), Joseph Hansen (1910-1979).

After he had slipped and fractured his hip, Alex Buchman died from cardiac insufficiency in Los Angeles on January 7, 2003, leaving behind his beloved wife Debbie and his son David.

At the end of our short survey we should like to quote from a fine biographical sketch of Buchman written by Suzi Weissman on which our miscellany is chiefly based:

"Alex was loyal, critical, and caring. He was like a father, comrade, friend, mentor, and fan, all rolled into one. He was also a gentleman, a *caballero* in the finest sense of the word, generous to a fault, giving of himself when he shouldn't. [...] Like the best of his generation, Alex was clear-sighted, committed, and elegant. His honesty and integrity forced him early in his life to choose sides in the class struggle. His weapon of choice against an inhuman system of exploitation turned out to be a camera, his legacy the photographic record he left for future generations. It is the

* The other men doing service as Trotsky's guards and/or secretaries at the time of Buchman's uphold at Coyoacán were Otto Schüssler (1905-1982), Joseph Hansen (1910-1979), Charles Cornell (1911-1989), Walter Rourke (?-?), and Jean VanHeijenoort (1912-1986).

** R.S. Harte (1915-1940) was involved in the machine-gun assault of May 1940 by a Stalinist gang led by Mexican painter Siqueiros; however, Harte was kidnapped and murdered and it was only in the 1990s that it was revealed that he was a Stalinist agent.

*** Suzi (Susan) Weissmann (b. 1949) is a Professor of Politics at *St. Mary's College of California*, a writer (e.g. on Victor Serge and on Soviet/Russian issues) and broadcast journalist. She is affiliated to *Solidarity*, a Trotskyist current in the USA, and a member of the editorial boards of journals like for example *Critique* and *Against the Current*.

artist's eye behind the lens, his sensibility and generosity that will be so sorely missed". *

*Selective bibliography***

- ***Books dedicated to Buchman:***

Hirson, Baruch: *The restless revolutionary* : Frank Glass. - London : Porcupine Pr., [2004]. - XVI, 251, [8] pp.

- ***Literature about Buchman:***

Patenaude, Bertrand M.: Trotsky in exile : rare images of the aging revolutionary in his walled refuge, as his life ticked down, in: *Hoover Digest*, 2010 (2), pp. 174-181. [About Alex Buchman and his photographs and films documenting Trotsky's life in Mexican exile]

Weissman, Susan: Alex Buchman, the last survivor of Trotsky / Suzi Weissman, in: *Critique : journal of socialist theory*, 2004 (35), pp. 151-162. [Obituary]

Weissman, Susan: Alex Buchman, 1911-2003 : photographer from Shanghai to Coyoacán / Suzi Weissman, in: *Against the Current* <TSB 0014>, n.s. 18.2003 (2=104), pp. 41-43. [Obituary]

Weissman, Susan: Alex Buchman (1911-2003) / diesem Text liegt ein weitaus umfangreicherer Artikel von Suzi Weissman zugrunde... Übers. und bearb. von Friedrich Dorn, in: *Inprekorr : internationale Pressekorrespondenz der IV. Internationale* <TSB 0654>, 2003 (384/385), p. 47. [Obituary]

Weissman, Susan: Alex Buchman (1911-2003) / trad.: Francisco T. Sabrino, in: *Herramienta : revista de debate y crítica marxista*, 2003 (22). [Obituary]

Sidelights, notes on archives

— The pictures and films that Buchman shot of Trotsky at Coyoacán are the best of his photographic work. A good deal of them have been published in books about Trotsky or as posters (often without reference to Buchman) and some have been displayed on the occasion of exhibitions, political gatherings and so on. It was Tariq Ali, renowned writer and film maker from Pakistani origin, who produced a noteworthy film on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Trotsky's assassination which was titled *Trotsky's home movies* and aired by British TV in August 1990. This fine documentary made extensive use of Buchman's film sequences shot in 1939/40 thus depicting an impressive record of Trotsky during the last months before his death and showing the 60 years old revolutionary leader and Stalin's arch-foe in his everyday life, at home, fishing, on picnics with friends and visitors etc. Buchman's films and photographs from Coyoacán also show Trotsky's wife Natal'ia Sedova, his grandson Sieva (Vsevolod) Volkov, guards, secretaries etc.

* Weissman, Suzi: Alex Buchman, the last survivor of Trotsky, in: *Critique : journal of socialist theory* (Glasgow), 2004 (35), p. 161-162.

** TSB item numbers (e.g. <TSB 0716>) refer to Lubitz' *Trotskyist Serials Bibliography*, München [etc.] : Saur, 1993, which is out of print but available as PDF file within the framework of *TrotskyanaNet*. In TSB you can find detailed descriptions concerning the respective Trotskyist journals, newsletters, bulletins and the like.

— Together with Mark Sharon, another Trotskyist veteran, Buchman was interviewed in a film featuring the life of Trotsky murderer Ramón Mercader, *Asaltar los cielos (Assault the heavens)* which was produced in 1996 and awarded film prizes in Germany (at the annual *Berlinale* film festival) and Spain.

— By the way, Buchman's name should not be confused with another *Alex Buchman*, editor of *A night in the barracks : authentic accounts of sex in the armed forced*, New York, NY, 2001.

— The *Hoover Institution Archives* at Stanford University (Stanford, Cal.) is the repository of the *Alexander H. Buchman Papers, 1927-1989*. The collection chiefly consists of 1 folder, 100 envelopes, 5 motion picture film reels, 2 videotape cassettes, 14 slides and 6 phonotape cassettes; it is open for research. A register (folder level description) to the Buchman papers is available on the WWW under the URL:
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf6199n7s5>

— The Houghton Library (Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.) is the repository of a considerable collection of photographs taken by Alex Buchman in Mexico 1939/40. An inventory titled "Buchman, Alexander H., 1911-2003, photographs of Leon Trotsky and others : guide" is available on the WWW under the URN:
<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.Hough:h001851> (last update Nov. 19, 2008). The call no. of this collection is MS Russ 13.9 (2)

— Note: Mention of Alex Buchman and his Trotsky films is made, too, in the *Collectibles* section of our *TrotskyanaNet*, URL: <http://www.trotskyana.net/LubitzCollections/Collectibles/collectibles.html>.

Wolfgang and Petra Lubitz, 2005
rev. July 2010

This miscellany is part of

The Lubitz TrotskyanaNet