Charles Curtiss

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Basic biographical data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Charles Curtiss</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other names (by-names, pseud. etc.):</td>
<td>C. ; Carlos ; C. Charles ; Carlos Cortes ; Charlie Curtiss ; Sam(uel) Kurtz ;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date and place of birth:</td>
<td>July 4, 1908, Chicago, Ill. (USA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date and place of death:</td>
<td>December 20, 1993, Los Angeles, Cal. (USA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationality:</td>
<td>USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occupations, careers, etc.:</td>
<td>Printer (lino-typist), political and union organizer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time of activity in Trotskyist movement:</td>
<td>1928 - 1951</td>
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Biographical sketch

This biographical sketch is chiefly based on those biographical sketches and obituaries which are listed in the last paragraph of the selected bibliography below.

Born Sam(uel) Kurtz 1 as a son of immigrants from Poland in Chicago, Ill. on July 4, 1908, Charles (or, Charlie) Curtiss earned his living by various jobs as miner, sailor, etc. before becoming a printer (lino-typist). In Los Angeles he married Lillian Ilstien (1911-1985) in 1935 from whom he got a son, David (born 1943), and a daughter, Carolyn (1950-1993).

In 1928, Curtiss in Chicago joined the ranks of the Communist League of America (CLA), an organization of left communists, chiefly expellees from the Communist Party of the U.S. because of 'Trotskyist deviationism'. Led by James P. Cannon, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, the CLA soon became the American affiliate of the international Trotskyist movement which soon adopted the name International Left Opposition. As a skilled printer, Curtiss took responsibility for the production of CLA's weekly paper The Militant. In 1932, Curtiss was sent by the party leadership to Los Angeles, Cal., in order to help building a CLA branch there. Curtiss soon became one of the best known Trotskyists on the West Coast and was successful in recruiting a considerable number of young communists for the cause of Trotskyism. After the followers of Cannon and Shachtman had fused with those of Abraham J. Muste to form the Workers Party (WP), Curtiss was elected to the new party's National Committee and strongly advocated Cannon's (and of course Trotsky's) orientation towards entryism into the Socialist Party of Norman Thomas. As a close confident of Cannon and since he had been a successful party organizer and at the same time was very fluent in Spanish, he was sent to Mexico several times during the 1930s as a representative of the highly esteemed U.S. section and of the secretariat of the international Trotskyist movement, respectively. Thus from 1933 to 1934 he was engaged in the

1) Sometimes also spelled Kurz

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formation of a Mexican section of the Trotskyist Movement for the Fourth International; he also assisted the Mexican Trotskyists in setting up a print shop, producing a newspaper, leaflets and so on. His meaning for the development of Trotskyism in Mexico becomes evident by the fact, that the name Curtiss is mentioned several dozen times in the chapters about Mexican Trotskyism contained in two well-known reference works authored by Robert J. Alexander.

When in 1937 new and severe differences among Trotsky's Mexican followers arose which probably would end in splitting and weakening the movement there, Trotsky asked the American SWP leaders for help; following a visit to Mexico by SWP leaders James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman and Vincent R. Dunne in early 1938, Charles Curtiss again was sent by the SWP leadership to Mexico, as a representative of both the Socialist Workers Party and the Pan-American-Pacific Bureau of the Movement for the Fourth International, charged with the not easy task of reconstituting the troubled Mexican section and to bridge the differences and bring to an end the struggles among its leaders. Curtiss' negotiations lasted several months before the Liga Comunista Internacionalista (LCI) was eventually reconstituted in January 1939 and asked for official recognition as Mexican section of the Fourth International (officially proclaimed in September 1938). During this Mexican mission, Curtiss – who used to be called Carlos or Carlos Curtiss or simply comrade C. by the Mexican comrades – was also successful in establishing a considerable Trotskyist theoretical paper in Mexico which was named Clave: tribuna marxista (Key: a Marxist tribune) and which to a certain degree could be regarded a very mouthpiece of Trotsky in Spanish language running from October 1938 to May 1941.

From June 1939 to August 1940, Charles Curtiss again lived in Mexico, joining Trotsky's staff while Curtiss' wife Lillian – also a devoted member of the SWP – from October 1938 to June 1939 served as secretary for Natal'ia Sedova, Trotsky's wife, and as English-language shorthand typist for Trotsky. Charles Curtiss at the same time functioned as Trotsky's primary link with the Mexican Trotskyists – it would have been illegally and unwise under the terms on which Trotsky was granted asylum in Mexico for Trotsky to maintain direct political contact with radical political movements in his host country. Last not least, Curtiss also tried to resolve personal and political differences between Trotsky and the famous Mexican artist Diego Rivera in whose 'blue house' the Trotskys had lived from 1937 to early 1939. When the fatal attempt at Trotsky's life, committed by GPU agent Jaime Ramon Mercader del Rio Hernandez alias Frank Jackson occurred on August 20, 1940, Curtiss was not present at the house in Coyoacán. It is said, that some weeks earlier Curtiss, who considered Mercader odd and unreliable, had warned Trotsky.

After returning to Los Angeles, Charles Curtiss again earned his living as a printer and continued to be an indefatigable organizer and agitator. In the early 1940s, both Charles and Lillian Curtiss – who had sided with James P. Cannon in the factional struggle against the Burnham-Shachtman tendency – were transferred from Los Angeles to the New York headquarters of the SWP, where Charles was designated to replace James P. Cannon, who was put on trial, as SWP National Secretary while Lillian took up a job as manager of Pioneer Press, SWP's publishing arm. But Charles couldn't take up the post because already before the Minneapolis defendants were sent to jail, he was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent as a GI to the Italian battlefield in 1943 where he experienced the horrors of war. It was there, too, that the Curtiss' wife Lillian – also a devoted member of the SWP – from October 1938 to June 1939 served as secretary for Natal'ia Sedova, Trotsky's wife, and as English-language shorthand typist for Trotsky. Charles Curtiss at the same time functioned as Trotsky's primary link with the Mexican Trotskyists – it would have been illegally and unwise under the terms on which Trotsky was granted asylum in Mexico for Trotsky to maintain direct political contact with radical political movements in his host country. Last not least, Curtiss also tried to resolve personal and political differences between Trotsky and the famous Mexican artist Diego Rivera in whose 'blue house' the Trotskys had lived from 1937 to early 1939. When the fatal attempt at Trotsky's life, committed by GPU agent Jaime Ramon Mercader del Rio Hernandez alias Frank Jackson occurred on August 20, 1940, Curtiss was not present at the house in Coyoacán. It is said, that some weeks earlier Curtiss, who considered Mercader odd and unreliable, had warned Trotsky.


3) Trotsky had been granted asylum in Mexico in January 1937 and lived until his assassination in August 1940 as a political refugee in Coyoacán, a suburb of the Mexican capital Mexico City. For quite understandable reasons, Trotsky could not directly and personally intervene into Mexican political matters.


5) In December 1941, James P. Cannon together and 17 other leaders of the SWP and the Teamsters Union were convicted and sentenced in the famous Minneapolis 'sedition' trial under the notorious anti-union and anti-communist Smith Act (Alien Registration Act of 1940) for their radical opposition to U.S. government policy during War.
that he met the English Trotskyist Charles van Gelderen who was on service in the British Army and was closely co-operating with Nicolo di Bartolomeo (Fossa) and other Trotskyists in the Italian resistance who were busy in building an Italian section of the Fourth International and setting up a newspaper, Il Militante. Later, van Gelderen remembered Curtiss providing funds for the fledgling organization by organizing vast quantities of American cigarettes which were sold by the Italian comrades on the black market. Curtiss was also very helpful with the printing of the just mentioned journal and other information and propaganda material.

After World War II, Charles Curtiss for some years continued his party work in the SWP. However, after having become disenchanted with the Trotskyist movement, critical of the party leadership in general and of Bolshevik-Leninist organizational principles in particular, he left the party in 1951 and joined the ranks of the reformist Socialist Party (SP), nevertheless maintaining friendly relations with many of the old Trotskyist comrades, collaborating whenever possible. His wife Lillian, however, remained a member of the SWP until she was eventually expelled in 1984 in the wake of the Barnesite party cleansing. Charles Curtiss until his death was active in the Los Angeles local branch and the State Committee of the Socialist Party of California and edited its national paper, The Socialist (Los Angeles), from 1985 to 1992; besides this, he was a union organizer and for many years functioned as a shop steward in the Typographical Union. He also actively took part in the protest movements against the Vietnam War and the First Gulf War.

Charles Curtiss died of a heart failure in Los Angeles on December 20, 1993. On January 23, 1994 a memorial meeting attended by some 100 people was held in Los Angeles to celebrate his life and work.

### Selective bibliography

1. Selective bibliography: Books, collections, journals, bulletins to which Curtiss contributed

- Fourth International (New York, NY, 1940-56) <TSB 0532>
- Internal Bulletin / Socialist Workers Party (New York, NY) <TSB 1548>

6. According to George Saunders and Kathleen O’Nan, “Lillian was put on trial, but the Barnes team announced that ‘because of her historical role’ - almost everyone in the Los Angeles branch loved her - they were going to make her an exception and not expel her. She wrote a statement rejecting this. She counted herself one of the ‘honourable expellees’” (Saunders, George and Kathleen O’Nan: A founder of the SWP...)

7. In the early 1980s, several hundred SWP ‘veterans’, loyal to the programme of Trotsky and the Fourth International, were either expelled or bureaucratically excluded from the party after they had got into a sharp conflict with the layer of younger party activists grouping around Jack Barnes, Larry Seigle, Mary-Alice Waters and others. These younger leaders had been recruited to the SWP in the wake of the student revolt and the Vietnam War resistance of the 1960s/1970s and successively had taken over the leadership from the retiring ‘old guard’ of party leaders. The ‘Barnesites’ soon became busy in substituting the traditional Trotskyist programme and political orientation of the SWP by a closer alignment to the Castroite Cuban communist line despite its partial adaptation to Stalinism. Thus they explicitly abandoned Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution and repudiated more or less the entire body of Trotskyist thought, thus challenging the very foundations of the Fourth International; all connections with the FI were officially ceased in 1990, but factually the SWP disaffiliated from the international Trotskyist movement already several years earlier.

8. 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 Lubitz’ TrotskyanaNet website. In TSB you can find detailed descriptions concerning the respective Trotskyist journals, newsletters, bulletins and the like.
Charles Curtiss

Bio-Bibliographical Sketch

appraisals]
Quatrième Internationale (Paris etc., 1936- ) [ISSN 0771-0569 - ISSN 0765-1740] <TSB 1282>
The Socialist (Los Angeles, Cal.) [ISSN 0884-6154]

• Selective bibliography: Books and articles about Curtiss

[Anon.]: Charles Curtiss. [Biographical sketch, Wikipedia article]

Note: More informations about Charles Curtiss are likely to be found in some of the books, pamphlets, university works and articles listed in the relevant chapter(s) of the Lubitz’ Leon Trotsky Bibliography [ISSN 2190-0183], e.g. in chapters 7.5.14 and 7.5.18.

Notes on archives

Some archival material with regard to Charles Curtiss can be traced by browsing through the archives of renowned contemporaneous Trotskyists or through the archives of the Socialist Workers Party. A small collection is housed at the Hoover Institution Archives (Stanford, Cal.): the Charles Curtiss Papers, 1938-1987 (one ms. box), containing correspondence, writings, notes, minutes, reports and some printed matter chiefly relating to the internal problems of the Mexican section of the Fourth International as well as to the troubled relations between Leon Trotsky and Diego Rivera at the end of the 1930s. The call no. of this small collection of papers is XX(4090025.1)
A considerable number of letters from and to Charles Curtiss from the 1930s can be found within one of the most eminent Trotsky archival collections, the Exile Papers of Lev Trotsky (call phrase: bMS Russ 13.1), forming part of the famous Trotsky Archives housed at Houghton Library, Cambridge, Mass. Documents within this collection relevant to Curtiss – including letters exchanged between Trotsky and him and so-called secretarial correspondence as well as other documents (e.g. notes

9) For some details about those archival collections and for finding aids see the sub-chapter on Public Archives : America within the framework of our Lubitz’ TrotskyanaNet website.
10) The collection contains some documents concerning Lillian Curtiss, too.
11) For details about this collection see the sub-chapter on Public Archives : America within the framework of our Lubitz TrotskyanaNet website.
12) ”The secretarial correspondence is essentially an extension of Lev Trotsky’s correspondence. Several of the letters, however,

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