Sam Gordon

Bio-Bibliographical Sketch

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Basic biographical data

Name: Sam Gordon
Other names (by-names, pseud., etc.): Burton ; Drake ; Harry ; Joe ; Joad ; J.S. ; Paul G. Stevens ; J. Stuart ; J.B. Stuart ; J.E.B. Stuart ; Ted ; Tom
Date and place of birth: May 5, 1910, ??? (Austria-Hungary)
Date and place of death: March 12, 1982, London (Britain)
Nationality: USA
Occupations, careers, etc.: Printer, journalist, translator, seaman, organizer

Biographical sketch

Sam Gordon was an outstanding Trotskyist who during the 1940s played an eminent rôle as a liaison man between the American SWP and the European Trotskyists as well as within the leading bodies of the Fourth International. The following biographical sketch is chiefly based on the material listed in the last paragraph of the Selective bibliography section below.

Sam Gordon was born on May 5, 1910 as a son of Yiddish speaking Jewish parents living in that part of Poland which then belonged to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. However, when Sam was still a baby, the family moved to Vienna, the Austrian capital, thus the boy grew up in a German speaking environment. In 1920, the family went to New York (USA) where Sam Gordon rapidly learnt English and got naturalized under the Americanized name of Gordon; as an adolescent he was fluent in three languages. In the early 1940s, Gordon got acquainted with Mildred Fellerman (1923-2016), a British teacher, later a school governor, a Labour Party activist and a Member of Parliament. When the two met again in Paris in 1947, they fell in love, and in 1948 they got married in Reno, Nevada, with C.L.R. James functioning as one of the witnesses. In the 1950s the Gordons got a son, David. Sam Gordon earned his living by a great variety of jobs, ranging from seaman to printer and proofreader.

Gordon's interest in Marxism and radical politics dates back to the years 1927/28 when he attended the College of the City of New York (CCNY) and soon became a member of the Young Communist League (YCL), the youth arm of the CP of the USA. However, after having listened to James P. Cannon 1) and 2) James P(atrick) Cannon (1890-1974) was a co-founder and leader of the Communist Party of the USA but was expelled when he associated with Trotsky's Left Opposition in 1928. Together with Martin Abern, Max Shachtman and other renowned anti-Stalinist com-

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CCNY’s Social Problems Club and thus having got acquainted with genuine Trotskyist ideas, Gordon joined the ranks of the Communist League of America (CLA), the first American party affiliated with the international left oppositional current inspired and led by exiled Leon Trotsky. In 1929, Gordon decided to go to Germany in order to experience advanced class struggle in action, as he told. Reaching Hamburg (Germany) on board of a German merchant ship, he soon made his way to Berlin, the German capital and at the time probably the biggest communist stronghold outside Soviet Russia. During his 1929/30 sojourn there – earning his living as a cocoa salesman – he actively participated in the class struggle and regularly sent letters to The Militant (New York), the weekly organ of the CLA; most of these letters were published as articles in The Militant, giving lively accounts and situation reports from Germany where political and social crisis accelerated in view of the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler’s national-socialist movement.

After returning from Berlin via Paris to the United States, Sam Gordon soon began to play a leading rôle in the young American Trotskyist movement. Thus, he became a staff writer of The Militant and at the same time its printer. It was Max Shachtman, probably the most outstanding intellectual in the ranks of the CLA, from whom Gordon learnt how to write, edit, layout and proofread a weekly. When Shachtman for some months in 1931 left The Militant staff in the wake of a conflict with Cannon, young Gordon even was charged with the editorship of the paper. He got a lot of encouragement from James P. Cannon and the latter’s life partner, Rose Karsner; for a while, Gordon even shared their household and was treated by them like a son. From 1932, he was a member of the leading bodies (National Committee or Political Bureau) respectively of the CLA and its successor organizations. In 1938, when the U.S. Trotskyists after a phase of entrism and regroupment launched a new organization, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Gordon was one of its founding members, belonging to its leading bodies until the early 1950s. During his American years, Gordon’s political activities were manifold; thus in the 1930s he functioned for some years as a branch organizer in New York, Cleveland and Boston, was engaged in the movement of the jobless and later got involved into various trade union work, e.g. as a speaker and organizer in the Painters’ Union and in the Seafarers’ International Union; for some years he also co-edited its paper, Seafarers Log, together with Tom Kerry, another prominent SWP militant.

A few days after the Second World War had broken out in Europe, the headquarters of the Fourth International, hitherto chiefly located in Paris (France) was transferred to New York where the International Secretariat (IS) of the FI held its first meeting already in September 1939. The SWP was represented in the IS by James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman and Sam Gordon who at that time began to use the pen name Stuart. The meeting elected a Resident International Executive Committee (IEC) and Gordon was appointed its administrative secretary. In this capacity he was involved in the preparation of a gathering which became known as the Emergency Conference of the Fourth International which was held in New York on May 19-26, 1940 and which passed a number of resolutions and issued a manifesto written by Leon Trotsky, entitled The imperialist war and the proletarian world revolution.
Gordon was elected a member of the International Executive Committee (IEC) at the conference. In June 1940, he joined a SWP delegation, consisting of James P. Cannon, Farrell Dobbs, Joseph Hansen and Antoinette Konikow, visiting Trotsky in Coyoacán, Mexico, and discussing with him the perspectives and implications of the unfolding war.

The war-time *Fourth International* was, of course, dominated by the American section, the SWP, which because of reactionary U.S. legislation ceased to officially call itself a section of the FI in 1940. Jean Van Heijenoort, who from 1932 to 1939 had served seven years as Trotsky’s secretary and thus enjoyed an unquestioned authority with regard to in-depth knowledge concerning the sections and quarrels of the FI, factually functioned as head of the International Secretariat during the entire World War II period. He was chiefly assisted by some outstanding and devoted American Trotskyists as for example Sherry Mangan, Charles Curtiss, and Sam Gordon. However, by the end of 1941, the latter had to be replaced as administrative secretary by another member of the SWP leading staff, Bert Cochran, since as a sailor Sam Gordon had to go off to sea. For some four years, he served as engine greaser on ships of the U.S. merchant fleet which in navy convoys had to bring essential supplies to Britain and other allies, permanently being threatened by German submarines’ attacks. As a seafarer, Gordon continued to help organize the SWP’s seamen’s union fraction, and when his ship entered a European harbour, Gordon took every possibility to meet with British and other European Trotskyists thus helping to maintain some contacts and relations between the international leadership and them as well as supplying them with information material under the difficult conditions of the World War.

At the end of the War, Gordon went to Paris as a member of the IS, which in March 1946 eventually was shifted back from America to Europe, and was helpful in reconstructing the European sections of the FI which had suffered severe human and material losses during the War. Already during War, in 1944, Gordon was able to establish contact with Michel Pablo (Raptis), the leader of the European Secretariat of the FI, who should emerge as the principal FI leader and chief theoretician during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Travelling devastated post-war Europe, Gordon was successful in finding out some dispersed Trotskyists, particularly in occupied and divided Germany.

However, he was less successful in achieving longer lasting unity between the various rival Trotskyist groups and tendencies which had been emerging during the war years and thereafter, e.g. in Britain. In March 1946, Gordon participated as SWP delegate in the first international conference of the FI which was held in Paris. Gordon’s sojourn in Europe as a SWP delegate lasted until 1948 when he was sent to Ceylon from which, however, he was soon expelled. From the end of 1948 to 1952, the Gordons lived in New York, enjoying friendly relations with some outstanding intellectuals being members or close sympathizers of the SWP, such as for example C.L.R. James, Duncan Ferguson, John G. Wright, James T. Farrell and Sherry Mangan. The last 30 years of his life, Sam Gordon spent in Britain, except some visits to Paris (where he met Trotsky’s widow, Natal’ia Sedova), Milwaukee and elsewhere. When the U.S. authorities snatched his passport in 1952 – which he only got back around 1960 – Gordon refused to return to McCarthyite U.S. He found a job as proofreader with *The Times* (London) and besides was occupied with translations, the most pretentious of which was, of course, the translation from German into English of Rudolf Hilferding’s classical work on *The finance capital*.

"He remained politically active to the end of his life, but he took a lower profile". When the *Fourth International* split in 1953, Gordon sided with the faction led by James P. Cannon and Gerry Healy becoming a member of the rival international Trotskyist organization, the *International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)* and of its British section which for some years practised entryism in the *Labour Party*, before under Healy’s authoritarian leadership transforming into an increasingly sectarian and bizarre sect. However, Gordon soon dissociated from the Healyists and belonged to those

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8) Thus for example in July 1946 he found Georg Jungclas, one of the few German Trotskyists who had survived emigration, persecution, war and hunger, in an American camp near Bayreuth, Bavaria.


10) Ibid.
within the International Committee who in the second half of the 1950s began to favour re-unification of the ICFI with the other main faction of world Trotskyism, the International Secretariat of the Fourth International (ISFI), led by Ernest Mandel, Pierre Frank and Livio Maitan (and until about 1960, Michael Pablo), which eventually could be achieved in 1963 by launching the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI). Almost 20 years of his life, Sam Gordon suffered from a particularly insidious type of cancer affecting one organ after another; facing his illness with greatest courage, he had several operations; his survival for some 20 years astounded his doctors. For several years, despite his illness, he continued earning his life as a printer and proofreader and also carried on his activities in the printers' union and on the left fringe of the Labour Party. Besides this, he kept his contacts with many renowned people on the British, continental and American left, engaged in fund-raising campaigns for defence committees and so on. After retiring from his job in 1975, Gordon enrolled at North London Polytechnic where he eventually took a degree in modern German literature; shortly before his death, he took up studies at the London School of Economics. Sam Gordon died in London on March 12, 1982, leaving his wife Mildred and his son David; a memorial meeting in honour of Sam Gordon took place in London on March 19; speakers included his long-time friend C.L.R. James and Alan Harris, a leader of the British International Marxist Group (IMG). We are closing our biographical sketch about Sam Gordon with some quotations from Mildred Gordon’s appraisal:

"He never tried to do journalistic work for a living as he was not prepared to make the necessary political compromises; he preferred to earn his living as a printer. He was an ‘ideas man’, and many of the famous cartoons for the Militant by Laura Grey were based on Sam’s ideas worked out in the regular cartoon meetings. Later on he worked out ideas for a radio and TV supplement for daily newspapers. Roger Protz did a mock up, and Sam offered the idea to The Times, which did not take it up. Years later, all the papers produced a media supplement. [...] He was a brilliant linguist, and quickly found his feet almost anywhere. Sam was a warm, loving, outgoing person. He had no greed or jealousy. He was tolerant to a fault. If someone stole something from him, his reaction would be: ‘If they want it so badly, let them have it.’ Personally he aroused great loyalty, but politically he often aroused lasting hostility. [...] Sam would have been a great professor of German literature, and I am sure that he would have received the recognition he deserved. But he had a full and exciting life, and he would not have changed its course if he had had the chance. He did great service to the movement whose cause he espoused, and he was one of a small but valiant band who kept its ideas alive through the long years of defeat for the working class. As a young man in the USA, he had been a first class organiser in a number of industries and cities. He was always an imaginative and original thinker. He had an encyclopedic knowledge and total recall. He has been seriously underestimated".

11) Ibid.
13) Gordon, Mildred: Sam Gordon, scientific socialist (1910-1982), in: Revolutionary History, 5.1993 (1), pp. 9-13 (here: pp. 10, 11, 13). However, it should be noted that this positive view was sharply opposed by Albert Glotzer – see our footnote 4 above.
**Selective bibliography**

- **Selective bibliography: Books/pamphlets and journals (co-)edited by Gordon**

  The Militant (New York, NY) [ISSN 0026-3885] <TSB 1026>

- **Selective bibliography: Books/pamphlets translated by Gordon.**


- **Selective bibliography: Books, collections, journals, bulletins to which Gordon contributed**

  Bulletin intérieur / Secrétariat International de la IVe Internationale (Paris) <TSB 0542>

  Fourth International (New York, NY, 1940-56) <TSB 0532>


  Intercontinental Press (New York, NY) [ISSN 0020-5303 ; ISSN 0162-5594] <TSB 0657>

  Internal Bulletin / Socialist Workers Party (New York, NY) <TSB 1548>

  International Bulletin / publ. for the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International by the Socialist Workers Party of the U.S.A. (New York, NY) <TSB 0540>


  Die Internationale (Various places) [ISSN 0535-4005] <TSB 0731>


  The Militant (New York, NY) [ISSN 0026-3885] <TSB 1026>

  Quatrième Internationale (Paris etc., 1936- ) [ISSN 0771-0569 - ISSN 0765-1740] <TSB 1282>

  Revolutionary History (London) [ISSN 0953-2382] <TSB 1375>


  World Outlook = Perspective mondiale (Paris ; later : New York, NY) <TSB 1886>

- **Selective bibliography: Books and articles about Gordon**


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

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Notes on archives

As far as we know, there is no publicly accessible archive particularly devoted to Sam Gordon; however, a number of his letters and other archivalia can be found within the framework of collections preserved at those archives featured within the sub-chapters on Public Archives: America and Public Archives: Europe of our Lubitz’ TrotskyanaNet website, as for example:

- Papers of Rodolphe Prager at IISH (International Institute of Social History), Amsterdam
- Ernest Esra Mandel Papers at IISH, Amsterdam
- Papers of Joseph Hansen at Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, Cal.
- Socialist Workers Party Records 1928-1990 at Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, Cal.
- Socialist Workers Party Records 1928-2000 at State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives, Madison, Wis.