

A Tribute from a Progressive Librarians Guild Cofounder

— Elaine Harger —

My first encounter with Sandy Berman came in the dim — but not yet dark — stacks of the School for Library Service Library at Columbia University. I was doing research on libraries and censorship in South Africa and had been led by *Library Literature* to the 1984/85 edition of Sanford Berman and James P. Danky's *Alternative Library Literature* anthology. While sitting cross-legged in a narrow Library of Congress-cataloged aisle (SLS had Dewey aisles too) I met, in print, several members of a hoped-for progressive/radical/left library community and, for the first time since beginning library school, began to feel that I would, after all, find a place within librarianship where my activism, socialism and skepticism might be accepted and even appreciated.

Berman and Danky's *Alternative Library Literature (ALL)* provides an invaluable service to librarianship by assembling critical perspectives on all aspects of library practice and theory. Articles on cataloging, for instance, question the ways in which knowledge is categorized. Articles on collection development demand that librarians seek out the small and alternative press publications that give substance to libraries' professed commitment to acquire materials representing diverse points of view. Articles on social responsibility urge the profession to consider the role libraries can play in alleviating social problems. The latest edition should routinely be made a required text in the library and information science curriculum.

Not only do Berman and Danky collect all the material published in *ALL*, but I know that Berman is sometimes responsible for some of

the articles being written in the first place. He seeks out submissions to his "Alternatives" column in *Collection Building* and suggests to library publishers possible topics and authors for new books. Directly or indirectly, Sandy inspires, provokes, and challenges many of the individuals who write critically about librarianship and, in doing this, he contributes a great deal more to the profession than a listing of all his own publications and public presentations might suggest. Berman's spirit has at times filtered through librarianship imperceptibly and on occasion broken through explosively. If his influence were flower seeds there would be flowers popping out of books, catalogs, reference interviews, and staff meetings in libraries across the country.

In late June 1989 came my second encounter with Berman, this time in an American Library Association conference room in Dallas, Texas, where a diverse group of librarians was intensely debating the "SRRT Guidelines for Librarians Interacting with South Africa." My colleague Mark Rosenzweig and I, both recent graduates of Columbia's library school, went to this meeting curious to see how controversial political issues were played out within ALA. We were looking forward to becoming active in the left wing of our professional association, had closely perused the convention program for meetings where we might find like-minded colleagues, and knew that a discussion on the South Africa boycott, to which we were both committed, would be a good place to start. Mark and I had followed ALA's position on the international boycott in the library press, and we knew that recent modifications made by the anti-apartheid movement to the cultural component of the boycott were bound to stir things up, especially as the debate revolved around a fundamental disagreement between ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) and the Intellectual Freedom Committee over whether or not librarians' support of the boycott constituted "censorship."

The meeting room was filled with people, including Berman with his dashiki, black and white beard, precise speech, and restrained, yet passionate, presence. Also in the room were many librarians who, over the past years, have become friends, comrades, mentors, and adversaries.

During the course of the Dallas convention Mark and I became better acquainted with many of these people, including Sandy. We also attended SRRT meetings and discovered both an important, lively counterculture in ALA and a troubling absence of common purpose

and coordinated activism among our new colleagues. Sandy and his close friend Elliott Shore became our on-the-spot guides to the world of SRRT and, indeed, of ALA. We were sympathetic to a plea for a “new agenda” for SRRT from Berman and Shore. The round table was celebrating its twentieth anniversary and these two longtime SRRT members were discouraged that SRRT had drifted from its sixties activism and seemed increasingly unable or unwilling to provide much needed leadership on issues affecting the profession. The round table appeared content to support single issues as they arose, but had no broad perspective, much less a social responsibility-informed agenda, with which to counter the growing conservative, “free-market” trends within the profession. Berman and Shore believed that the “conscience of ALA” (as SRRT is often called by supporters and opponents alike) needed to develop critical analyses of, for instance, information technologies, privatization, and “merchandising.” The round table also needed to engage conservative sectors of the profession within ALA on these issues in much the same way as had been done with the South Africa boycott. Calling for a “new agenda,” Berman and Shore proposed that SRRT expand its newsletter, initiate a concerted membership drive, work with national coalitions, endorse boycotts, and lobby local, state and national library groups on a variety of issues. Unfortunately, SRRT Action Council did not agree and the Berman/Shore proposal fizzled out.

Mulling over SRRT’s shortcomings after the Dallas convention and wondering if it might be a good idea to get New York area librarians together to discuss librarianship, I arranged a meeting with Mark (then a reference librarian at New York Public) and Elliott (then, and still, library director at the Institute for Advanced Study in New Jersey) where we came up with an idea that ultimately led to the creation of the Progressive Librarians Guild.

Sandy Berman played two roles in the founding of PLG. First and foremost, he encouraged Mark, Elliott and me in our project to organize what was initially to be a regional (mid-Atlantic states) group for left librarians. He suggested to his Hennepin County Library colleagues, Jan DeSirey and Chris Dodge, that they spend part of their New York City vacation at the November 11, 1989, founding meeting of the yet-unnamed radical/progressive librarian’s group. When PLG suddenly became a national organization (as a result of *Library Journal*’s 2/15/90 article announcing PLG’s formation) Sandy immediately joined and has been a member-in-good-standing ever since.

Secondly, Berman “christened” PLG’s journal. “Comrades,” he wrote, “there’s only one possible name: *The Progressive Librarian*.” The editorial collective accepted his suggestion even though, as we joked, this particular title would inevitably land PLG’s journal next to *Progressive Grocer* in indexes and on shelves—a rather mundane and silly juxtaposition for a serious, radical journal.

The first issue of *Progressive Librarian* (summer 1990) was devoted almost entirely to articles and documents on censorship in South Africa and librarians’ support of the anti-apartheid movement’s cultural boycott. Sandy must have distributed dozens of copies to people on his extensive mailing list and certainly was responsible for many subscriptions. As of June 1994, eight issues of *PL* have come out since 1990, several of our articles have found their way into the Berman/Danky anthology, and Sandy has forwarded articles, his own and those of other writers, to *PL* for publication. Of his own writing *PL* has published “National Cataloging Campaign” (summer 1990) and “The ‘Fucking’ Truth About Library Catalogs” (summer 1992), an article which, as Sandy said, no one else would publish under that particular title, to which he had become rather attached. Also *PL* published resolutions from the Minnesota Social Responsibilities Round Table (MSRRT) which were destined for debate at ALA conventions—“Poor Peoples Services” (summer 1990) and “MSRRT Persian Gulf Resolution” (winter 1990/91).

Sandy is, of course, an activist. With fellow PLG members he protested at then-Senator Albert Gore’s ALA appearance in Chicago in early 1991 against Gore’s vote the day before in favor of the Gulf War; he picketed the H. W. Wilson booth after Wilson president Leo Weins fired *Wilson Library Bulletin* columnist Will Manley for his “sex survey”; he spoke from the Colorado capitol steps against that state’s antigay legislation. He has argued eloquently in support of progressive positions on a wide range of issues: loyalty oaths, ALA’s alliance with the McDonald’s hamburger chain and the Boy Scouts of America, library services to poor people, and the questionable library philanthropy of multinational agribusiness Cargill. He organized a joint PLG/MSRRT excursion to the Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago so that we could pay our respects to the Haymarket Martyrs, Emma Goldman, and others.

Sandy is also the conduit of vast amounts of information connecting activist librarians all around the globe. I am sure that scattered throughout his *Festschrift* are descriptions of the packets of letters,

articles, manifestos, clippings, reports, subject heading lists, and the like that he collects for us all. Indeed, ALA recognized Sandy's information network when it bestowed on him its Equality Award, noting that "his intellectual care packages have made him appear to be an active committee fronting as an individual." There have been some gems in the packets I have received and I am sure I'm not the only person to have a "Libraries Are Forever!" bookmark, emblazoned with Sandy's big red signature, tacked above my desk. In the past two months I have had a professor of American history and the director of a health care union's cultural wing ask, in almost identical words, "Do you know this librarian—Sandy Berman? He put me in touch with..." Sandy makes connections.

A recent ALA debate which engaged many PLG members, including Sandy, was that concerning censorship in Israel and the Occupied Territories. The story of the battle within ALA over the Israeli censorship campaign must certainly be told. But not here, and not now, for the aftershocks of that debate continue to rattle the nerves of librarianship and the damage done to the democratic processes within ALA, as a result of the backlash, is as yet not fully known. The issue has provided antidemocratic forces within librarianship with ample material to obscure and distort the basic principles involved in the debate over censorship in a country which receives billions of U.S. tax dollars and which practices its own brutal brand of apartheid—"peace talks" and Palestinian "self-rule" notwithstanding. For now, suffice it to say that Sandy and the rest of us fought a good fight and, though shell-shocked as many of us may be, we affirm what was accomplished while moving on to ensure that human rights, social issues, and social responsibilities remain on ALA's agenda.

No discussion of Berman's contributions to librarianship would be complete without at least a passing mention of the on-going effort for which he is most known—Library of Congress subject heading reform. The importance of his work in this area to me as a labor librarian might best be conveyed with a little examination, à la Berman, of a random sample of a few books and their LC headings.

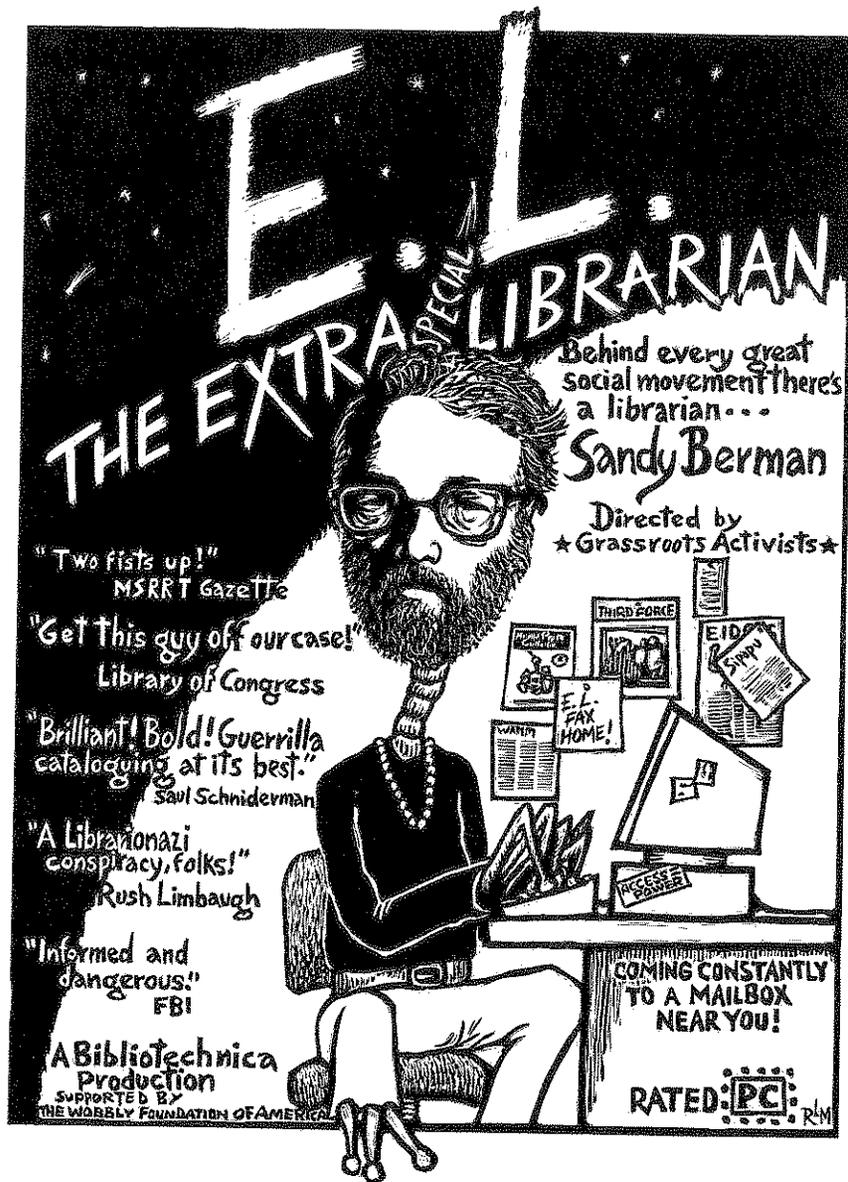
In the field of labor, Library of Congress subject headings are abysmally bad. Take, for example, the 1988 publication *American Rubber Workers & Organized Labor, 1900-1941*, by Daniel Nelson. Fortunately, LC used "TRADE UNIONS" to begin the two headings it assigned, but it did not use the *name* of the union being studied (the United Rubber

Workers), nor did it make any attempt to connect this ancillary industry to its primary user, the auto industry. Similarly, the 1986 book *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900* by Richard Oestreicher, a study of the influence of the Knights of Labor in the development of Detroit's organized labor community, received from LC the out-dated "LABOR AND LABORING CLASSES" heading (since replaced by LABOR, LABOR MOVEMENT, and WORKING CLASS), as well as ALIEN LABOR, SOCIAL CLASSES and DETROIT, but inexplicably no TRADE UNIONS heading, even though twelve unions are clearly identified in the book's index, nor a STRIKES AND LOCKOUTS heading even though 18 Detroit strikes are listed in the index. Worse, KNIGHTS OF LABOR isn't even assigned. The 1993 *Forging Revolution: Metalworkers, Managers, and the State in St. Petersburg, 1890-1914* by Heather Hogan, which deals with the development of the labor movement in an important prerevolutionary Russian city, is accessible under METALWORKERS and INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, but not under TRADE UNIONS or LABOR MOVEMENT. These three relatively straightforward cases of LC shortcomings point out some problems associated with cataloging materials for an interdisciplinary field. In labor studies libraries, works of literature, medical and legal works, and other materials perhaps only indirectly related to labor are best cataloged with a view as to how they might be useful to someone studying organized labor.

Sandy Berman's understanding of the processes through which people find information, his awareness of the biases and inadequacies of LC cataloging, and his dogged determination to make library materials accessible to library users have served as a model for librarians dedicated to making the richness of even the smallest collections serve the broadest spectrum of potential users.

Finally, on a more personal note, there is a Berman thread woven into the fabric of my life and it has been a source of strength and inspiration. Sandy and I have had our differences, but, in spite of it all, I think we can call one another trusted friend and comrade.

Here's to you, Berman!



*Everything You Always
 Wanted to Know About
 Sandy Berman
 but Were Afraid to Ask*

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