

Michael Lipman (1902-1978): a short biography

Michael Isaac Lipman, or 'Mick' as he was more commonly known, was born in Leeds in 1902. His parents – who changed their surname from Lipnik to Lipman to sound less 'foreign' – were Russian Jewish emigrés who had decided to settle in England while en route to America in the Spring of 1892. They had left Russia following a family row over their antipathy towards Orthodox Jewish traditions. His father was a journeyman tailor who eventually became an independent ladies tailor in Leeds; his mother worked in the home and appears to have been an incredibly strong influence on the young Lipman, who was spoilt as the youngest only boy of five children.

From his earliest memories, Michael Lipman found himself engulfed in the anarchist-socialist politics of his atheist parents. They had rapidly renounced their religious faith upon arrival in England and become active in the radical labour movement of the early twentieth century. He was thus surrounded by an incredible diversity of left-wing political groups and traditions, his parents house always full of visiting revolutionaries and conscientious objectors from across England and the rest of the world. Whether they were pacifists, revolutionaries, anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, Marxists, social democrats, liberals, or Quakers, they left a profound impression on Lipman. The most famous of these was Emma Goldman, whose nickname 'Red Emma' gave the wrong impression according to Lipman:

If this conjures up a vision of a juno-esque figure holding aloft a Red Flag, something like a cross between Britannia and La Passionara (a heroine of the Spanish Civil War) nothing could be further from the reality. A tiny, mousy type, whose only feature I can remember was a pair of remarkably expressive and penetrative eyes.¹

Michael Lipman's own political activism began at a relatively early age. When just 6 years old, he was thrown out of the scriptures class at infant school for stating that "my father says there is no God", a blasphemy not tolerated in a school that drew its pupils from exclusively Orthodox Jewish families. Aged 12, he elevated to Leeds Central High School and like the children of the labour movement's leaders, went to the local Socialist Sunday School. In 1916, aged just 14, Lipman was arrested at school after being shopped by a school mate's father for distributing anti-war literature. He was briefly expelled before being allowed to return. Undeterred, Lipman kept up his anti-war activity. His main role being to keep watch outside army barracks or the Town Hall from where conscientious objectors were about to be sent off under guard to a military depot. On his signal, a crowd would suddenly gather to sing the Red Flag and load the prisoners with sandwiches and books. Three of Lipman's sisters married conscientious objectors all of whom were arrested and served prison sentences.

The 1917 Russian Revolution in March led to a frenzy of excitement among the British Socialist left marked by the famous Leeds Conference in June of the same year where 1000 delegates, including the future prime minister Ramsay Macdonald, and socialist revolutionary John Maclean, gathered to welcome the revolution and call for a Soviet England. In his autobiography, Lipman remembers delegates sleeping in chairs and on floors at his home, and the feeling that a revolution was imminent in Britain.

This remarkable upbringing profoundly shaped Lipman's intellectual and political outlook, as the following extract from his autobiography *Memoirs of a Socialist Businessman* elucidates:

¹ Goldman and Lipman were to have their own political disagreement in the 1930s as the sharp disjuncture between their respective Marxist and Anarchist perspectives became apparent.

I was...born a ready-made socialist-atheist, acquiring from my earliest and most impressionable years the habits of thought, the ideas and the jargon of unorthodoxy, and this ingrained habit of mind has been with me ever since. At school, university, in engineering, management and commerce, I have always questioned accepted methods and modes of thought and action, and it has been not only more profitable in every sense, but infinitely more satisfying, although given the habitual conservative approach in this country, it has often been uphill work. I do not just mean being a consistent 'anti', opposing established thought or principle – just a habit of questioning accepted tenets, which I owe to my early upbringing; I remember being told at an early age, 'Never be afraid of asking why.'

After the war, Lipman attended Bradford Technical College before going on to Leeds University where he trained as an engineer. In his memoirs, Lipman describes the striking rich-poor class divide at university and the complete absence of political activity among the student population. He himself steered clear somewhat of politics during this time, choosing to study hard. Unable to get a job in the post-war slump after graduating from Leeds University in 1924, Lipman started an electrical contracting business with a friend, which for a year or so was a huge success as they took advantage of the radio boom to assemble and supply wireless radio sets and parts for businesses and homes across Yorkshire. When the radio boom turned to bust after the General Strike of 1926, the business faced insolvency and was forced to offload at a loss its fixed capital stock in radio equipment.



In 1928, Lipman sold his share of the partnership and moved to London where he began a successful industrial career developing the radio industry across Europe, mainly with the company Ecko. This was not just a career move – he had met and fallen in love with his future and only wife Gertrude King and he decided to follow her down South; within a year they were married. Just prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, Ecko and specifically Lipman were commandeered by the RAF to find factory premises

capable of producing unspecified radio equipment with not more than 200 workers. With his wife, Lipman purchased Cowbridge House, a large mansion on the River Avon very near to Malmesbury. When war finally began, Lipman's mission was made known to him: he was to help develop and build radio aircraft-detection systems that would be installed in RAF planes to detect bombers, surface ships and submarines at night and in bad visibility.

The activities of Michael Lipman and the radar innovators at Cowbridge House became the subject of a book by Celia Fremlin and published in 1943 by Gollancz. *War Factory*, as it was entitled, came about through Lipman's attempt to solve some of the problems of morale in Cowbridge House by inviting the social anthropology group Mass-Observation² to secretly study the workforce. Although Lipman never realised the report would be published during war-time, the 'War Factory's' location was not revealed in the

² Mass-Observation was founded in 1937 as a social research organisation by three left-wing anthropologists, Tom Harrison, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, with the aim of studying the everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain to create an 'anthropology of ourselves'. They pioneered the method of making precise observations about what people did during their daily routines, using a team of usually unpaid volunteer investigators to record impressions of people in a wide variety of public situations. See www.massobs.org.uk

book and he escaped any retribution. The factory made one of the most important



contributions to the defeat of Hitler and led to Lipman being awarded the MBE in 1944. After suffering a brief breakdown in the immediate aftermath of WWII and then failing to get a job in the British civil service, Lipman joined forces with an Austrian businessman as part of an export business, developing trade links with countries across the Eastern bloc, particularly Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. It was a career that entailed spending long and frequent periods abroad and so, as the sixties began, the Lipmans decided to slow down, moving out of London to a hundred-acre farm

in Kent. Although Michael Lipman had no agricultural farming knowledge or background, he immediately applied his brilliant technical mind to farming. He specialised in dairy herding and beef-raising and made large investments that eventually increased the productivity of the land year on year. The Lipmans sold the farm in 1972 when Michael discovered he had Lymphatic Leukaemia, and in his final years he turned to reflect on his life, producing the remarkable Memoirs from which this short biography owes a massive debt.

In the final chapter of those memoirs, Michael Lipman makes a clear statement of the political and moral philosophy that guided the decisions he took throughout his life and to which he remained committed until the end.

Socialism is to me faith in the human race translated into the political arena, and my atheism is inseparable from my socialism, because man must organize his affairs, without expecting any aid from some Supreme Being, towards a decent civilized existence for all mankind. No society has survived which either out of fear or genuine belief has relied on God to save it from itself.

Lipman passionately believed in the ability of people to democratically control and organise society in a just, egalitarian and efficient way. To him, electoral democracy was largely a fraud in Western democracies where the class system determined real power. He was adamant that "the universal vote, is meaningless without economic democracy, which to me includes a job for everyone at a living age". He also supported national self-determination and right for different populations to have different forms of democracy depending on their needs and circumstances. But he was above all a pragmatist, someone who believed in gradual human improvement through enlightened government and employer attitudes, the application of modern science and industrial techniques. He had little time for the divided dogmas and theological fundamentalisms of the socialist and Marxist left, seeing Marx's true legacy as his philosophical and analytical approach to interpreting the world, and not *the* answer to changing it. He was especially critical of those Marxists who fetishised the working class.

Lipman's commitment to socialist education and research was probably born through his experience of the Socialist Sunday School movement in the early 1900s, which he described as "an altogether admirable affair". There, along with future trade union leaders and Labour MPs, he was usually taught by adult members of the Independent Labour Party about colonialism, secularism and religion, as well as socialist literature such as Emile Zola's *Germinal* and songs and hymns of the movement. His dismay at the breakdown in this tradition was clearly an inspiration behind the creation of the Lipman Trust:

While I quite see that there is no room today, what with Television and other attractions, for such a movement, it does seem to me that members of the Labour

Party and Trade Unions seem less concerned these days, to see that their children get an opportunity of learning of the Socialist Movements past and the possibility (and desirability) of some form of society other than that promoted by the prevailing trend of the media and its "consumer" society.

Tellingly, it was on the failures of the British education system that Lipman's memoirs ended. He was mainly concerned with what he perceived to be the widespread ignorance of school-leavers about the nature of the world they lived in. While he favoured a strongly science-based educational curriculum, he also believed that a more radical approach to teaching history was needed, especially the truth about colonialism and the centuries of continuous social protest and revolt.

Michael Lipman established the Lipman Educational Trust in 1974 with a foundation sum of £50,000. He wanted to encourage socialist and progressive educational research, writing and debate. Following the advice of his friend, the Tribune Labour MP Ian Mikardo, Lipman approached Marxist intellectual Ralph Miliband to be its first director.

Michael Lipman died in 1978, leaving a widow and no children. His wife Gertrude Lipman bequeathed £5,000 to the Trust on her death, in 1990(CK).

Click below to read a biography of Gertrude Emily Lipman:
http://www.lipman-miliband.org.uk/Gertude_Emily_Lipman.pdf

Biography

Michael Lipman (1980), *Memoirs of a Socialist Businessman*. Lipman Trust/Whitstable Litho Ltd.

(available for borrowing at Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1R 0DU, UK. Tel #44(0) 207 253 1485. Fax #44(0) 207 251 6039, www.marxlibrary.net)

Pictures

1. Cowbridge works.
2. Photograph of Mr Lipman meeting Prime Minister Kosygin in USSR.