

# CLARA LEMLICH SHAVELSON: 50 YEARS IN LABOR'S FRONT LINE

By Paula Scheier

**I**T WAS not a usual union crowd that met at Cooper Union in New York the evening of November 22, 1909. It was large, but that the speakers on the stage had expected. It was tense, but they had seen tenseness before—eyes strained from watching stitches peering up at them, backs bent from years at cutting boards bending toward them. What was strange about this crowd was the women. Not even women, most of them . . . girls. How fresh their faces were, fresh from the small towns of the old country. How innocent they looked in those high starched shirt-waists and big picture hats. Did they realize what they were getting into?

One by one, they rose to speak, in English and in Yiddish—Goldstein of the Bakers Union, Weinstein of the United Hebrew Trades, Mary Dreier of the Women's Trade Union League, Meyer London of the Socialist Party. . . . The word "strike" was always greeted with applause. But, each one hastened to warn, a general strike in the industry was a serious affair. It might run into months . . . the manufacturers would not give in easily.

The crowd was growing restless. This was not what they had come to hear. They knew it would be hard. But what about the six-dollar salaries, the cheating on the piece-work? What about the foremen that yelled at you and the stinking toilets that overran into the workrooms? They had heard all about scabs and thugs and police. But would they ever have a union if they didn't strike now?

When Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, got up, a new eddy of excitement ran through the hall. The waist-makers should not act too hastily, he said, but "if you can't get the manufacturers to give you what you want, then strike . . . and let the manufacturers know that you are on strike."

If they couldn't get the manufacturers . . .? Suddenly, in the front of the hall, one of the girls jumped up. "I want to say a few words," she said.

The crowd buzzed. That was Clara Lemlich from Leiserson's—they were on strike already—for 11 weeks! "Get up on the platform," somebody shouted. "Yes, get up on the platform," other voices joined in.

They lifted her up: she was barely five feet tall; she was no more than 20. But they could also see the proud set of that head, the passion in those great, dark eyes. "I have listened to all the speakers," she cried in Yiddish, "and I have no further patience for talk. I am one who feels and

suffers for the things pictured. I move that we go on a general strike!"

Instantly they were on their feet, men, women and girls, cheering, stamping, crying approval. With one motion, Chairman Feigenbaum sprang to Clara Lemlich's side and thrust her right arm into the air. "Do you mean faith?" he cried. "Will you take the old Hebrew oath?"

For answer, two and a half thousand right arms shot up at him. Two and a half thousand voices repeated the Yiddish words: "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise." By the morning, one of the garment industry's first great strikes was under way—and a new labor heroine had been born.

THE NEWSPAPERS CALLED IT THE "REVOLT OF THE GIRLS." Clara Lemlich, they said, was its Joan of Arc. She was "the soul of this young woman's revolution," wrote Mary Brown Sumner in *The Survey*, "a spirit of fire and tears, devoid of egotism, unable to tolerate the thought of human suffering." Clara Lemlich explained "Why the Waistmakers Strike" in her article in the *New York Evening Journal* on November 26, 1909.

At nine, on the morning of November 23rd, thousands of shirtwaist makers left their shops in Manhattan, Brooklyn's Brownsville and the Bronx to march to Clinton Hall, the union's headquarters at 151 Clinton Street. Four-fifths of them were women.

But the strike was as well organized as it was dramatic. Each shop formed a strike committee, which set up headquarters in some East Side hall. Every midnight, the committees reported to the general executive at Clinton Hall. There each day's campaign was mapped; pickets and speakers were assigned. Even a special Italian headquarters with Italian literature was set.

That winter, the strike was Clara's life. She was up at six for the picket line, out during the day to raise money and speak at meetings, working far into the morning as a member of the executive committee.

The manufacturers answered the workers' militancy with violence. A year before, the Triangle shop, destined for its place in labor infamy, had hit upon a novel method for dealing with women strikers. Since the usual male thugs seemed inappropriate, they hired their female counterparts—prostitutes—to taunt and start fights with pickets. In 1909, a number of their colleagues copied the fashion.

The police, too, could be called upon to break up picket lines. On one pretext or another, they would arrest whole bunches of girls and haul them off to stand trial in the lower East Side's Jefferson and Essex Market courts. On December 3rd, the union protested the continuing arrests with a march of 10,000 strikers on City Hall. The mayor offered no help but public sympathy was aroused. The Women's Trade Union League, an organization of middle class, suffragette sympathizers, with the aid of such society suffragettes as Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont and Ann Morgan, held a meeting at Carnegie Hall to protest police brutality. Across the wide stage sat a row of "convicts," the youngest 15 years old, wearing streamers over their shoulders reading, "I am a criminal."

A number of the manufacturers had signed with the union at the beginning of the strike. As the winter went on, the holdouts were faced with the gloomy prospect of losing a whole season's profits. In January 1910, when Leiserson's fell, it was the beginning of the end. By March, 354 of the 400 struck shops had signed contracts with the Ladies Waistmakers Union of New York. A closed shop, a 52-hour week, a substantial pay raise and abolition of many abuses had been won. And, not least, the union had grown from 800 to 20,000 members, its treasury from next to nothing to \$2400 a week. Only a few months later, the giant cloakmakers' strike was to settle on its feet once and for all the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

But perhaps the most important thing established by that strike was a fact. Not only the journalists, but sober Samuel Gompers himself had called it a "revolution." Until then, women had always been considered labor's weakest link, its most negligible and expendable part. The liberal weekly *Outlook* was echoing all the press when it said (July 2, 1910), "These young, inexperienced girls have proved that women can strike, and strike successfully."

"THAT IS WHAT YOU MUST WRITE ABOUT!" THE SMALL woman with the vivid eyes would still rather talk about the strike's meaning than her part in it. "They used to say that you couldn't even organize women. They wouldn't come to union meetings. They were 'temporary' workers; they would always undercut men. Well, we showed them!"

It takes a while before you get Clara Lemlich Shavelson to talk about herself. When I visited her one evening last March, the news from the Caracas conference was just coming over the radio. "Look—" her tongue still has fury, "who tries to talk for Latin America!" On her end table was a ticket for a meeting to protest intervention in Guatemala. The phone rang with a query from a friend in her shop. While she talked, you noticed that the room is filled with books. No matter how many newspapers she reads each day, she must have a book "for dessert."

Music has been vital to Clara Lemlich from the time she was a young girl in Gorodok, on the Austrian border of the Ukraine. The rebellious daughter of an orthodox Jewish scholar and grocery-storekeeper learned her songs from the children, frowned upon by the family, of non-



*Clara Lemlich in 1909*

Jewish shoemakers and peasants who lived, as the Lemlichs did, on the outskirts of the town. She then promptly compounded the heresy by using her singing to make friends with the daughters of wealthier Jewish families who subscribed to the city libraries and gave her Russian books. The two-grade village school did not admit Jews, and Clara's parents, protesting in the only way they knew, would have no Russian—either in speech or in print—in their home.

Not only learning, but the money for it had to be gotten by stealth. Though the family was poor, ownership of the little grocery store made them too proud to let her work. She used to steal time from the housework to go and make buttonholes in the tailor shops—the only places of employment open to Jews—for money to pay the students who taught her to read. A few more kopeks for books were made by writing letters from parents to children in America. The books had to be hidden. Once, when her father found their hiding place—under the pan where meat was made kosher—he threw the whole painfully accumulated lot into the fire.

She would read late at night, creeping out of bed after the family was asleep, or on the Sabbath, when she would climb up into the attic and perch herself on a bare beam to pore over Turgenev, Gorky and Tolstoy. One Saturday

afternoon, when she was about ten, the neighbor who shared their semi-detached house stumbled upon her up there. He was so impressed by her passion for reading that he not only heeded her tearful pleas not to tell her parents, but brought her more books, among them her first revolutionary tracts.

BY THE TIME OF THE GREAT KISHINEV POGROM OF 1903, WHEN the Lemlichs, along with thousands of Jewish families, fled the Ukraine, Clara was singing revolutionary songs. In England, where they stayed for a few months, she was taken to Anarchist meetings. But her rebellion was still only personal.

In America, she was determined to become a doctor. But in America, as many an immigrant family was discovering, employers preferred to hire children rather than their parents. Within a week of her arrival, 15-year-old Clara was at work in a shop.

Almost immediately she started to study at night. One of her first great discoveries in America was the East Broadway branch of the New York Public Library, which had a great collection of literary classics in Russian. Oddly enough, she says, she learned more Russian from that library than she did in her years in the Ukraine. "I should have spent more time learning English correctly," she says, "but I was so eager to learn *things*." History and literature were her passions. After an 11-hour day in the shop, she would walk through half the East Side to the Gordon free school on Madison Street, stopping only for a penny or two's worth of milk. She ate her mother's dinner at 10 or 11 when she arrived home.

"All week long I wouldn't see the daylight. I remember once, when things were slow, they let us out in the middle of the day. 'What!' I said, 'are all the people on strike!' I had never realized that there were so many out during the daytime."

It was not at all strange that the first thing to come to her mind then was a strike. For not only at school was she learning new things. The older workers in the shops talked constantly about trade unions; in some shops there were even lunch-time discussion groups on trade union theory; small knots of workers, escaping the bosses' watchful eyes, would walk the streets, talking and arguing.

In the workers' constant struggles with the manufacturers, there were many individual shop stoppages, but none had the backing to succeed. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union was a weak six-year-old, consisting mostly of male cloakmakers, when, in 1906, Clara joined a delegation of waistmakers that went to the *Jewish Daily Forward* to ask how to go about forming a union. That spring, only two years after her arrival in America, she was one of the seven young girls and six men who founded the waistmakers' Local 25, I.L.G.W.U.

The organizing, at first, was slow, monotonous and discouraging. There were scores of shops and thousands of waistmakers. Clara, by then a skilled and relatively well-paid draper, was still hoarding money for medical school,

but she could not work in a shop without trying to organize it. She began to gravitate toward the smaller places where an individual organizer might exert more influence.

HER FIRST STRIKE CAME IN 1907, AT WEISEN AND GOLDSTEIN'S, an "uptown" shop in West 17th Street. It was new and considered a very desirable place to work, until the workers realized that the modern conveniences were being paid for out of a still greater speed-up. They held out for ten weeks, against every kind of attack.

One night during a meeting Clara heard a fierce argument break out over the general objectives of the union. When it was over, she went up to one of the cutters. What did he mean by attacking Samuel Gompers as a "pure and simple trade unionist?" she asked. The older man started to explain, then took another look at her eager face and asked if she would like to go for a walk.

"We walked 40 blocks," she says, "and he gave me my first lesson in Marxism. He started with a bottle of milk—how it was made, who made the money from it through every stage of its production. Not only did the boss take the profits, he said, but not a drop of that milk did you drink unless he allowed you to. It was funny, you know, because I'd been saying things like that to the girls before. But now I understood it better and I began to use it more often—only with shirtwaists." She also started to take classes in labor theory at the Rand School.

The great 1907 depression broke the Weisen and Goldstein strike, but others were still to come. In 1908, trade union consciousness among the waistmakers had reached such heights that the girls at the Gotham shop, where Clara was working, struck in protest against their boss' firing men to make room for cheaper women workers. And in the fall of 1909 the strike at Leiserson's broke out.

The union was then divided into crafts and the operators, who were men, went ahead with their plans without consulting the workers of other crafts, many of them women. They were more than a little surprised when, suddenly, at their strike meeting, there was Clara, asking for the floor. Didn't they know, the teen-age girl scolded them, that if they went out alone they would lose! The only thing to do was to take the whole shop with them. She managed to convince the operators and, with their help, the rest of the workers. Even Leiserson seemed impressed by her: in 11 weeks of picket line scuffles she was arrested 17 times and six of her ribs were broken.

"Ah—then I had fire in my mouth!"

Her hands fly to her head when she remembers the famous speeches. "I read about them now—all those important people and Clara Lemlich here, Clara Lemlich there! What did I know about trade unionism? Audacity—that was all I had—audacity!"

The union and the public at large, however, seemed to think otherwise. The Socialists, whose meetings she constantly attended, never asked her to join their party because they took it for granted that she was already a member. Professor Charles Beard, whose wife was an

active strike sympathizer, was so struck by her that he offered to get her into Barnard and help her through college. The great dark eyes grow a bit wistful when she thinks of the lost education. "But it was too late. I was swallowed up by the trade union movement."

THE STRIKE OVER, THE SLEEPLESS NIGHTS AND MONTHS OF inadequate food at last made themselves felt. Clara broke down completely and had to be taken to the country to recover. When she returned a few months later, it was to the blacklist. She was only one of the rank-and-file strike leaders, who for several years thereafter, could find work in the industry only under assumed names, constantly being fired when their identity was discovered.

However, her loyalty to the union remained undiminished. She kept up with all its activities, attended every convention. Late in 1910, it finally rewarded her with a job as factory inspector—to see that the reforms she had played such a large part in winning were being carried out. The union appointed its own inspectors, with official city sanction, because of the city inspectors' apparently strange lapses in observation when it came to factory working conditions.

At the same time she returned to her activities in the Women's Trade Union League, which she had joined during the strike, and to whose executive board she was soon elected. The League had close ties with the Woman's Suffrage Party. Even though most of its middle class ladies did not agree with Clara's outspoken socialist views, Mary Beard could not resist asking her to speak for them.

In the years before World War I, Clara spoke for woman's suffrage on Riverside Drive and, more frequently, outside the gates of factories that employed women. She remembers particularly the Butterick Pattern and Uneeda Biscuit plants in downtown Manhattan, where the men workers would come out and call: "Go home and wash your pants!"—often driving home their point with rotten tomatoes. The women would usually stay inside, peering out the windows, somewhat frightened and not too sure what was in it for them.

Their attitude soon changed, however, when Clara's ideas of what should go into a suffrage speech prevailed. Shortly after she became an active suffragette, Jessie Ashley, a prominent socialist, died and left the Suffrage Party a fund for the express purpose of bringing the fight for the vote to working women. Clara then became a paid organizer of labor groups within the party and special material was printed to show the relation of suffrage to child labor, sanitary conditions and other workers' problems. On the soap boxes and ladders outside plant gates now, she talked about women in the labor movement and women as the wives of workers. When she told her audiences about the families burned out of their tents after being evicted from company houses during the Colorado mine strike of 1914, she had no trouble getting rid of her leaflets. The men took them, as well as the women.

IN 1913, CLARA MARRIED JOSEPH SHAVELSON, A PRINTER AND

an old comrade from the strike days. "He was a fighter," she says. It is her highest praise. Her husband's family had taken part in the Russian revolution of 1905; Joe, then a gangling teen-ager, had been a member of the Social Democratic Underground, traveling from town to town with illegal leaflets hidden underneath his coat. "He was so thin that no one could tell." Clara would listen by the hour to the Shavelsons' stories, sometimes feeling that she almost wanted to go back to this revolutionary country of her birth.

But, even if it had been a serious thought, there were to be no wedding trips for the young Shavelsons. Joe, unable to get into the printers' union, was earning \$17 a week. They went to live on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn with one of his sisters and her two children. "I still hoped," says Clara, "that I could finish school." By then, without any grade schooling, she had managed, in ten years' time, to accumulate 48 out of 60 high school points, and she still had not given up her dreams about medical school. But in a year she had had her first baby and the family's finances were still lower.

When her son, Irving, was two-and-a-half, she went to work in a tie shop on the ground floor of the building where her sister lived. Her second child, a daughter, Martha, was just old enough to walk when Clara began taking the youngsters with her to Socialist meetings. Soon she was speaking for a Socialist women's group to protest profiteering on food prices. When the landlord who owned the two-family houses on the East New York block where they then lived tried to raise the rent, she organized a rent strike—which ended with the Shavelsons being evicted. They moved then to Grafton Street, in Brownsville, where Clara's second daughter, Rita, was born.

Clara reacted to these personal burdens characteristically: she became an organizer for the United Council of Working Class Women, a housewives' community organization that allied itself closely with the growing labor movement. Besides fighting on prices and rents, it set up kitchens and joined picket lines during many a strike of the late twenties, including the famous Passaic strike.

THE ONSLAUGHT OF THE DEPRESSION IN THE THIRTIES FOUND Clara in Brighton Beach organizing that working class community's first Unemployed Council. She went on both the 1930 and 1932 hunger marches.

Hardly a single one of the dramatic struggles of the thirties was not to become a part of her. In 1935, when the United Council had become the Progressive Women's Council, it followed up a successful 1932 bread strike with a great battle against the high cost of meat. Clara was among the leaders of both fights in Brighton Beach, organizing picket lines and mass meetings and making her fiery speeches as of old. The meat strike became so successful that it spread throughout the country.

Among the earliest active anti-fascists, in 1934 she attended the first International Women's Congress Against War and Fascism in Paris. She remembers that trip well



Clara Lemlich Shavelson at her war work in 1944.

not only for the conference but for her travels after it, which took her, for the first time since her childhood, to the country of her birth. "We went by train to Moscow," she says, "and there was a bus there to meet us. But I wouldn't get on it. I told the others to go ahead without me. This was the country where they wouldn't even let me go to school—where if I walked into a city they would have made me wear a prostitute's badge. And now—I wanted to stand there for a long time with my feet on the soil of a workers' country."

She returned to the United States to lecture and show slides of the USSR to some 30 clubs of the Progressive Women's Council. As educational director of the Council, she gave courses on fascism, war and peace. And soon she was a familiar figure at Brighton Beach street corner meetings, rallying the Jewish workers with her own passionate clarity against the Hitlerism that threatened them.

WHEN THE UNITED STATES ENTERED WORLD WAR II, MRS. Shavelson was back at it again with the old energy. The Progressive Women's Council had merged with the women's clubs of the International Workers Order. By then PWC president, Clara became New York City secretary of the IWO's Women's Division, working day and night to organize first aid classes, knitting circles, aluminum

campaigns, bond rallies. And in 1944, when she realized that her husband's strength was failing, she went back to the shop and was in the union again.

For nine years, until her retirement this past spring, she remained in the shop, a hand-finisher on cloaks and a rank-and-file union member. She still went to union meetings, fought with both boss and foreman, and found time for her many outside activities.

During the Stockholm Peace Petition campaign she got 500 signatures—93 of them the day after the Korean War started. She also collected 1200 signatures to the 1951 petition for a five-power peace pact.

In 1951 she made her second trip abroad, this time as a member of a trade union delegation. In France, Italy, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, she heard about wages and working conditions, housing and health problems, and always and foremost, about peace. "Peace was the most important issue to all those European workers," she says. "We heard that everywhere we went. It was on all the walls and all the banners. If any of us had thought that there was a danger of war from the Soviet Union or anywhere in Europe, we were convinced now we had been wrong. We were convinced that our job was to go back and tell American workers that if they too would struggle for peace, there could be no war."

When she returned home, Mrs. Shavelson gave the message of peace in countless speeches to countless meetings. She brought it back into the shop with her and to the women of the Emma Lazarus clubs with whom she now works.

It is not only the children and the six grandchildren (Joseph Shavelson died in 1951) that make Clara Shavelson say now, "I'm not a poor woman; I have dividends." First among them, she counts the union. (When the ILGWU broke a rule, requiring 15 consecutive years of work in the industry, to give her a pension last spring, she wrote to David Dubinsky—in a letter which was reprinted, in part, with a story about her in the union paper, *Justice*—"I feel that this is in some measure a tribute to the early band that struggled and fought to eliminate the sweatshop system and bring the benefits of unionism to thousands of workers.") Then, there is the growing respect for women as unionists, which she helped establish. There was that election day in 1921, when she cast the first precious vote she had helped win. There is the unemployment insurance that she helped fight for, the defeat of fascism that she helped bring about, the socialism she has always worked for triumphant in half the world. And she still may count.

If there is any further dividend still owing to Mrs. Shavelson, it is the recognition of Clara Shavelson, and not only of Clara Lemlich. Clara Lemlich was a brilliant youngster of whom she can rightfully be proud. But Clara Shavelson, she feels, has accomplished much more. Clara Shavelson is no Grand Old Lady of progressivism, no symbol of the past. She is as young as Mother Bloor was in her eighties, or Elizabeth Gurley Flynn is at 64, because she, too, will never stop fighting.