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Mary Saran's Life on the German and British Left



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Recently, I've been interested in Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund, a vegetarian socialist group formed in Weimar Germany, that was active in the anti-Nazi resistance, and merged with the Social Democratic Party of Germany after World War II. It's come to my attention there are at least two English-language books that deal with this group to a certain extent. The first is Mary Saran's autobiography, *Never Give Up*. The second is *Eva and Otto* by Tom, Kathy and Peter Pfister. I've read the first and hope to read the second soon.

Saran's manuscript was completed only two months before her death in 1976. She was born in Germany in 1897, so it should come as no surprise the rise and fall of the Nazis plays a dominant role in her narrative. For instance, describing her childhood under the Kaiser, Saran offers a bit of foreshadowing by telling us which of her siblings became Nazi activists. Her description of one sister reminded me of Dorothy Thompson's famous 1941 essay for Harper's, "Who Goes Nazi?," about the personality types most susceptible to fascism.

"For her personally, the Nazi movement had a liberating effect," Saran wrote of Käte, who had a child out of wedlock. "The frustrations and humiliations to which she had been subjected in her youth had lingered on, although outwardly she had been able to cope with life. When the Nazi ideas swept over Germany these early experiences were at last washed away." Merely as the mother of sons, Käte was held in high esteem in the fascist world view. Further, as the leader of a women's group, she found an outlet for unrealized ambition.

Thankfully, Saran took a different path. After World War I, she joined the Independent Social Democratic Party, which had separated from the SPD. This group reunited with the larger organization, as the former lost members to the Communist Party of Germany. She also participated in education and discussion groups led by Leonard Nelson, who appears to have been a Kantian socialist and ethical vegetarian. In 1925, Nelson's followers were expelled from the SPD, leading to the formation of the ISK, which Saran joined.

I don't know much about German history, but at least in Saran's telling, the vegetarian socialist group seems to have been on the correct side of the question of how to respond to the rising fascist threat. While the Communist Party and the SPD apparently refused to cooperate with each other, the ISK supported united action against the Nazis. Saran fled the country with her daughter in 1933. They eventually made a home in Britain, where Saran joined the Socialist Vanguard Group, which was essentially a British branch of the ISK.

The SVG appears to have operated within the Labour Party. The sect rebranded a few years after the end of World War II. "Its basis had proved too narrow for it to grow and be effective," Saran wrote. "Its members, together with a few dozen others, then established Socialist Union which set out to define anew, under the changed post-war conditions, the aims and principles of socialism." What exactly this meant isn't clear. But one wonders if the vegetarian emphasis was jettisoned.

In 1950, Saran began working for the Socialist International. Eventually, she became the international women's secretary, a position she held until her retirement in 1963. Overall, the book is an interesting account of a life on the left, during the most violent period in human history. I was a little disappointed, however, the text didn't address the ISK's vegetarianism more. Of course, there were countless socialist groups of that era. What made the ISK unique was its anti-speciesism.

Saran mentioned the demands placed on Nelson's circle, including abstinence from flesh, were fairly easy for her to follow. She noted that, after arriving in Britain, she worked at a vegetarian restaurant opened by other exiled members of the ISK. Saran recalled a trip to Japan, following her retirement, when she was asked to speak on the English fishing industry, but had to confess her ignorance as she remained a vegetarian. That's about it, though.

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