Passionate Anarchy: Portrait of a Life

by Don Alexander

Atilio Bortolotti, better known as Art Bartell, was an Italian-born anarchist, who emigrated to Canada in 1920, and eventually became a successful businessperson. For some 25 years after arriving in this country, Art remained an active anarchist and anti-fascist, becoming gradually more absorbed in his business affairs beginning in the late 1940s. From then until his recent death, Art used proceeds from the business to help support numerous anarchist publishers, schools, and archives throughout the Western world.

Kick It Over, founded in 1981, was one recipient of Art’s generosity. When I met Art around 1985, Kick It Over was in desperate financial straits. Having heard about Art from our fellow anarchist publishers at Strike!, we decided to screw up our courage and go see him.

This we did and Art generously gave us $500.00. We developed a relationship with Art which, while it had its financial component, was based on genuine respect and admiration. At the time we first met him, Art was 82 and his life-long companion Libera in her early 70s. Despite their age, the two were rigorous and passionate, and a constant source of advice and encouragement.

Art had an incredible memory, recalling events and persons with the same clarity of detail as when they first occurred. He and Libera were also keen exponents of healthy living, taking vitamins and eating fresh produce from their garden. Art once described junk food “as an outrage to the cells of the body.”

Libera and Art were devoted to each other. As the younger member of the pair, Libera was saddled with some of the responsibility for looking after Art, especially after his faculties began to fail. She was warm and grandmotherly, but not above nagging when she felt Art was somehow being derelict in his duties. Being relatively well-off (and with the care of the business in the hands of their son), Art and Libera used to winter in Miami Beach each year. After I left Kick It Over (1989), I gradually lost touch with them, especially after moving to the West Coast. In 1995, I learned (belatedly) that Art had died.

Art’s Childhood in Italy

Art was the fifteenth of eighteen children and, by his own account, was the only rebellious one of the bunch. His family was Friulani, an ethnic group from the northeastern part of Italy which speaks Romansch, a language similar to that spoken in parts of Switzerland.

The first manifestation of Art’s rebelliousness was in refusing to go to church. When the state passed a law ordering daily religious instruction for children, Art persuaded his friends (both male and female) to go play doctor-and-nurse in a local granary. In another manifestation of rebelliousness, a 10-year old Art stole a load of manure for a poor widow from a neighbour who had lots to spare.

When he was 12, a friend suggested that he make love to one of the neighbourhood girls to ensure that he would never have to go into the priesthood. His father caught him in the act, and Art fled. For three days, he slept in a box car at the railway station. When his family found him, his father gave him a brutal beating. Art never spoke to his father again.

The experiences of the First World War turned Art into a convinced anti-militarist. In 1917, when he was 14, Art and his friends cut down an Italian soldier who had been strung up by his thumbs as punishment for dereliction of duty. That same year, Art and his family fled during a fire fight between German and Italian soldiers and, when they returned, they found the streets of the town littered with corpses.

Food was scarce, but Art proved a resourceful scavenger, and brought back lots of looted food for his mother and family. While his father and siblings were extremely religious, his mother waffled. Once, as he and she passed corpses in a ditch on the way back to town, his mother exclaimed “If there is a God, why does he allow wars and killing like this, if he is so powerful?... God must be a refugee.” To find a kindred spirit in his mother made Art ecstatic.

His opposition to war was further confirmed when a German officer, billeted at their house, cradled and shielded a child who had become hysterical during an air raid. Having been fed propaganda about German atrocities, Art asked the man about these allegations. The officer replied: “Young man... I am a professor; I was teaching at the University of Berlin when I was called to serve in the army. I don’t feel that I have the right to kill you because you were born here nor should you feel you can kill me because I was born in Berlin. I want you to remember three words: ‘Freiheit uber alles!’ [freedom over all].”

Emigrating to North America

At the end of the war in 1918, Art decided to emigrate to Canada. Military service was mandatory in Italy, and Art didn’t want to be a soldier for anyone. He wrote to his older brother in Windsor and was able to get entrance papers within a few weeks. However, the lack of space on transatlantic steamships delayed his passage, and that of another brother, until 1920.

When he finally left home, he was almost 17. He and his brother arrived at Ellis Island, where they were detained for a few days, and then made their way to
Windsor via Detroit. He entered Canada with a wooden box of clothing and $14.00.

For three years he worked as a helper to a Ukrainian blacksmith in an Italian-owned shop. After getting into an altercation with the man (who always referred to him as "dago" or "wop"), he quit. Soon after, he illegally moved to Detroit and got a job at a Chrysler plant. This was in 1922. He had already been reading about religion, and came to describe himself as an atheist. After reading a leaflet about the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, he began to explore the meaning of anarchism and that same year — at a discussion group that met in the back of a grocery store — first described himself as an "anarchist."

Soon after, he became part of an anarchist network which straddled the two cities. He borrowed pamphlets and books from a Sicilian candy store owner in Detroit, and began to participate in protests against Mussolini's rise to power. He also became an apostle of free love after reading a book on the subject by a man named Berthelot, and a copy of Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* magazine.

Growing tired of being questioned about his nationality every time he took the ferry over to Detroit — especially since he considered himself Friulani not Italian — Art one day replied that "I was born in a town that is located at forty-six degrees of latitude and thirteen degrees of longitude, east of Greenwich." Though they sent him back to Windsor, he thereafter always used that refrain.

For the next few years, Art worked at blacksmithing, and at construction with one of his brothers. Economically, culturally, and politically he was as much a "citizen" of Detroit as of Windsor. After a brawl which he helped instigate at a public presentation by the fascist Italian consul, Art's work site was visited by the American immigration police. Fortunately, he and his brother got away. Later, the Canadian authorities came looking for him where he rented a room, but his landlord put them off the scent. However, he was now unable to work in Windsor as the fascists had managed to get him blacklisted.

A short time later, Art was picked up and hauled in to see the Windsor chief of police, who told him to get out of town and out of Canada, or face a long prison term for sedition. Art was broke, owed money to his landlord, and wondered what he was going to do. He spent 5 cents on the ferry to Detroit, found a room, and saw an ad at Ford for a tool-and-die maker. He applied, under the pseudonym Art Berthelot, and got the job.

Meanwhile, the incarceration of Sacco and Vanzetti dragged on, and in August 1927, they were executed. On the night of the execution, Art got into a confrontation with a riot control officer at a demonstration. They exchanged blows with sticks and clubs, but Art managed to get away.

Art also continued to confront the fascists. At a rally in Detroit on Columbus Day in 1928, a fascist shot two anti-fascist demonstrators, killing one and severely injuring another. Art started beating one of the fascists. When the police arrived, a sympathetic shopkeeper hid Art behind some barrels of apples, and thereby saved him from arrest.

In 1929, he was distributing leaflets at the Fisher Body plant when he was arrested. After getting into a shouting match with his interrogators, he was knocked unconscious, and was transferred to the county jail.

Within weeks, he was put on trial, and when the trial judges found out he was an anarchist and an atheist, which he made no effort to hide, he was ordered deported. His comrades raised $3000 bail, a huge sum in those days, to get him out of jail. His brother came to fetch him back to Windsor, and within a few days he had been involved in yet another altercation involving the fascist consul. As Windsor was getting too "hot" for him, Art packed his few belongings and took the train to Toronto.

**Art's Years in Toronto**

It took Art a couple of years to make solid contacts with the radical Italian community. At a meeting at the radical Matteotti Club, a socialist leader challenged him to a debate. Out of the debate a group was formed of fellow anarchists from Italy and Friuli, and they initiated a publication called *Il Libertario* [The Libertarian]. As Art relates:

In 1934 we started to print *Il Libertario*. We had an old duplicator — hell what a job! Four pages, six pages maximum. We tried our best but we had no one who was a writer. But what the hell! We were all workers and semi-illiterate as we were, or less, because many were totally illiterate at the time, the old Italians you know.

They also organized a drama group and put on regular plays and recitals, followed by benefit dances. Of the half-dozen or so anarchists in the group, most were anarcho-communists, though Art considered himself an "anarchist without adjectives," not wishing, as he put it, to put any one leader or theorist on a pedestal.

Attilio Bortolotti and Libera Martignago
Ever internationalist in his outlook, Art formed a strong relationship with the local Jewish anarchists, and it was through one of them that he first met Emma Goldman. He describes the first time he heard her speak: “I went to hear her and was flabbergasted by the way she spoke, with her energy, with the beauty of her sentences. She was nothing to look at — short, fat, unattractive — but when she spoke, with that fire in her, you forgot everything.”

Introduced to her at the time, Art did not see Emma again until 1939, when she was in Toronto to give some lectures. She stayed a month or two, and the two of them became good friends. He used to drive her around, and would sometimes arrange her lectures, including a couple that she gave in Windsor. Of course, Goldman was terribly homesick for the United States, but all she could do was stare across the Detroit River at her adopted homeland.

In 1939, after exposing the fascists’ attempts to hide their activities behind the ‘neutral’ veneer of a language school, in a lecture that was reported on in the *Windsor Star*, Art became the subject of new threats and began carrying a pistol for protection. The fascists also alerted the American and Canadian immigration authorities to his having jumped bail in Detroit. After a period under constant surveillance, Art and two other comrades were arrested under the provisions of the War Measures Act, for carrying on anti-war agitation.

As the sole single man of the trio, Art took the rap for all the activities. Emma Goldman hired a top lawyer to defend him. Art was acquitted, but was rearrested a short time later, for entering the country illegally. He spent the next three and a half months in jail, awaiting deportation. During this time, he became quite sick, and it was Emma who both got him out of jail and nursed him back to health. What happened to his personal library is worth relating in Art’s own words:

On the day of my arrest, the Toronto ‘red squad’ came in and seized all my books and periodicals, a big collection of 1500 volumes, along with all my correspondence. A big truck arrived and hauled it all away, and two years later they burned it. The day before the burning, two Mounties came to my house [Art was out of jail by this time] and told me they would be burning everything the next day. I said, “You think that by burning my library you will burn my ideals?” A few days later another Mountie came, a young man born in Vancouver of Friulani parents. He brought me half a dozen pamphlets. That was all that remained of my collection. All the rest had been destroyed. If I live to be a thousand years old, I’ll never forget that. The Mountie asked me what was anarchism. When I replied, he said “Why, that’s democracy!”

The same year that Art was arrested, he and Libera, the daughter of an Italian anarchist, became involved with one another. Libera was in the apartment when the Friulani Mountie arrived and managed to warn a deserter from Detroit in Italian, who thus escaped imprisonment and possible death.

When Art got out of jail, he immediately began searching for work. His skill — tool-and-die making — was in much demand for the war effort but, as Italy was at war with Canada, he encountered much hostility. After striking out at a number of plants, he changed his name to Bartell, a Dutch name, and was hired by a Dutch foreman who mistook him — with his blond hair and blue eyes — for a countryman.

Art used the money from his new job to save up for a house to rent for Emma, himself, and her secretary, who were living in very cramped quarters, without adequate money for postage for their voluminous political correspondence. On the evening of February 17th, 1940, Art was en route to a speaking engagement to commemorate the anniversary of the burning at the stake of Giordano Bruno. Intercepted at a friend’s, he learned that Emma had suffered a stroke and rushed right over.

Emma — who had played such an important role in getting Art released, and had probably saved his life — lost her powers of speech, which she never recovered. She lingered in the hospital and then died at home, three months later. It was only in death that the United States government allowed her back into the US, to be buried beside the Haymarket martyrs in Waldheim cemetery in Chicago.
Art’s Life After the War

After the war, Art and some colleagues were able to buy up used war machinery for very little, and they opened a machine shop. With a daughter from Libera’s first marriage, and a son on the way, Art began to devote more time to his family responsibilities. One by one, Art’s cohorts dropped out of the business, and Art remained saddled with its management.

In 1954, Art liquidated the business and went back to being a tool-and-die maker, doing machine maintenance and special projects for another firm. He still kept a few machines at home, and worked on various inventions. In 1959, he and Libera traveled to Italy for three months, his first visit in 39 years. To do so, they had to get legally married. The trip proved costly and, when he came back, he asked his boss for a $5.00 a week raise. His boss refused, and Art quit and used his remaining equipment to set up a two-person tool-and-die shop. His son, Lee, helped on evenings and weekends, and joined the operation full-time in 1963.

It was around this time that Art got a request from an acquaintance who had a construction firm to design a concrete floor-finishing machine that would work better than the models currently available. The prototype he built proved so successful that it launched him into his own manufacturing business. As the business solidified in the late 60s and early 70s, and his son took over more of the running of it, Art was able to take time off. He and Libera continued to live frugally, and much of the proceeds of the business went to support anarchist projects around the world. This began in the 1950s, and has continued right up to the present. Throughout his early years as a businessperson, Art continued to raise money to support Italian immigrants in distress, he and Libera put people up in their home, and cranked out leaflets on an old duplicator in their basement.

Art’s health began to fail in the late 1980s, and on February 10, 1995, at the age of 91, Art passed away. He and Libera had been together for a total of 53 years. Towards the end of his life, Art suffered from a loss of mental capacity, which rendered him unable to read even his beloved books. This was a cruel end for a passionate soul. I think a fitting way to end this tribute to his remarkable life is to offer another excerpt from Art’s own words:

Yes, I still feel the same way about anarchism. At first, I had been a real revolutionary. I was young and, like quicksilver, enamored of Galleani and of terrorists like Emile Henry. But during the Sacco-Vanzetti tragedy, which had great repercussions in Canada and made a lasting impression on me personally, the small response we got from the general population made me more reflective, more philosophical.

Money and property never made an incision in my psyche; money is not for our own aggrandizement, but to help those in need. Yet, I still believed in the necessity of violence up to the time of the Spanish Revolution. After May 1937 in Barcelona, I began to think: “Tens or hundreds of thousands of lives are being sacrificed. For what?” The anarchists had compromised their principles by joining the government. I began to see that anarchism cannot be imposed, that it can only be attained through education and propaganda.

Author’s Note: Some of the quotations are taken from Paul Avrich’s interview with Art Bartell in Anarchist Voices (reviewed in this issue), and some from an interview in KIO #17.

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