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# **My Friend C.E. Ruthenberg:**

## **Testimony of Theodore E. Kretchmar,**

### **Collected by Oakley C. Johnson for a**

### **Biography of C.E. Ruthenberg,**

### **circa 1940**

Newly edited version of a typewritten document in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers,  
box 1, folder 3, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, OH.

C.E. was always a quiet, well-conducted fellow, almost a model. He was innocent of the world. He never aroused criticism. He was a book lover and in any youthful group he took part in, he was always chosen secretary.

The first time I saw C.E. was when he entered first grade in the Lutheran School. He was six and I was eight. He had light brown hair and was the best-dressed boy in school. His parents had him looking like a Little Lord Fauntleroy. C.E. was the baby of the family, and those next in age were girls. They idolized him. He was very good in school and I have no recollection of his being disciplined. He was sort of a lone wolf, sort of aloof. I think it was bashfulness more than anything else.

C.E.'s father ran an old fashioned beer saloon. He wore a black skullcap even when serving beer. He was dark complected, while C.E.'s mother was blonde. The father impressed me as a stern Prussian sort of man. I was a boy of 11 when I saw him last. I would go in there to get pretzels. The father never indulged in liquor. Not a drunk in the whole family.

The mother was a very kind, quiet, simple woman, who "always walks with God." She always smiled so sweetly. She was not a woman of mental attainments, but the father seemed to have a philosophical foundation. There was always a symposium at the Ruthenberg home

— on Schelling, Fichter, and Hegel. CE's father died some ten years before his mother.<sup>1</sup>

In school he excelled in English, but had a good mathematical mind, too. This Lutheran School had girls as well as boys, but the girls sat on one side of the room, the boys on the other. School was opened with a prayer, and they had bible history and a catechism. All the religious part was conducted in the German language in this school, up to the World War.

C.E. had six toes on each foot and was very sensitive about it. He would rarely go barefoot because of this. All six toes were perfectly formed, a nicely shaped foot. He did not have to wear special shoes but always got a broad-toed shoe made of kidskin leather, very soft and pliable.

In the Lutheran School he got about the equivalent of 8th grade schooling. He finished about the age of 13 or 14 and finished business college when about 16 years old. His first job was with the Ohio Molding and Picture Frame Company — probably office work.

In childhood, C.E. preferred games of mental skill rather than physical games like Crack the Whip or Pom Pom Pullaway — he never played these. C.E.'s brothers had a gymnasium in back of the house. Dumbbells, boxing gloves, punching bags, a bar, weights, all in the barn in the back of the lot. His brothers were much older than he. He played there while they were away working, developing himself physically, especially when he was 15 or 16. He was also a great walker.

He had a dramatic group, a neighborhood group called the Imperial Dramatic Club, which lasted for about two years, about 1901 to 1902. C.E. was the executive and manager.

C.E.'s parents intended him for the Lutheran ministry. For a little while he thought of studying theology — but only a little while. In New York City McBane Walker, who was intended for the Methodist ministry, got C.E. away from religion. He was brilliant, atheistic, socialistic.

About 1905 Walker, C.E., and I formed a discussion group which C.E. called "The Huntsmen of Minerva." For two years we met regularly, every week or so, meeting alternately in each other's homes, and talked about the characters in Shakespeare, about Emerson, Thoreau,

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<sup>1</sup> There was actually an interval of 16 years between the deaths of Christian Friedrich August Wilhelm Rutenberg (April 19, 1839-August 23, 1898) and Albertina Frederika Wilhelmina Lau Rutenberg (Jan. 5, 1846-Nov. 21, 1914).

Whitman. C.E. liked books. He browsed in *Leaves of Grass*. He liked *Thantopsis* — it made a profound impression.<sup>2</sup> He enjoyed Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. He read Longfellow. *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* — these plays he read. The comedies? Not so much — except for *As You Like It*. He liked the theater from young manhood up, the classic drama.

We made investigations of religion, of Christian Science. C.E. did not think Mary Baker Eddy was worth much consideration. If he himself had a cold, he would not give in if he died, he worked it off.

He loved the outdoors, loved solitude, and though much by himself. There was very little frivolity in his life, he was serious minded. He did not drink liquor and did not smoke in youth. He did not swear. I never heard him use a profane word in his life.

We used to exchange books at Christmas time. I once gave him Heine's book of songs, *Das Buch der Leider*, in English. He avoided German as much as possible, yet he had a good foundation in it, and excelled at German in school.

He was thoroughly American in his early manhood and loved this country. He was thoroughly familiar with early Revolutionary history, the Civil War, and so on. He could name more signers of the Declaration of Independence than anyone living, I think. His aversion to German was patriotic in part.

In 1905 was the first time he began to read Karl Marx. He championed the capitalist side of the arguments with McBane Walker. C.E. was worsted, so he got *Das Kapital* to bone up on it, feeling his lack of knowledge to blame. Not long after that, he joined the Socialist Party. It runs in my mind that in 1906 he joined the SP. He was in the Selmar-Hess Publishing House at the time.

Informal arguments were held in the office. In these arguments there was a man by the name of Marshall who boasted of descent from Chief Justice Marshall. Also a man named Higgins. I was there and McBane Walker. At that time C.E. championed laissez faire — a man can have what he can get; those who failed, that's their hard luck. C.E. often talked of the foundations of the Selmar-Hess Company. It was founded by an immigrant Jew who, with a list, got his start by selling a book, *Half Hours with Jesus*.<sup>3</sup> This example, C.E. ar-

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<sup>2</sup> Landmark American poem written by William Cullen Bryant between 1811 and 1821.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. E.J. Goodspeed, *Children's Half-Hour with Jesus, Containing a Full Narrative of His Life, Written for Young People*. New York: Selmar Hess, 1877.

gued, showed how a man can work hard and get ahead. When he got into a debate he could give a good account of himself. It was uncanny, the amount of information he had stored away.

He had a most remarkable memory, especially for figures — a most mathematical mind. If, when he worked for the Selmar-Hess Publishing Co., you gave him the number of the account, he would give you the name. The company was on 5th Avenue in New York City. He had charge of about 30 or 40 salesmen in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. C.E. also had quite an experience selling himself, and was quite successful. Even while he was manager, he would go out and check up on the men and get orders.

My wife Alice was a midwife and she performed the obstetrics when Daniel was born. When his wife went into labor, C.E. started out afoot to get a doctor, but before going he had my wife there to keep Rose company. When C.E. got back with the doctor, Daniel was already born, his naval tied and the washing all done. My wife's sister was a trained nurse and had learned from her. She was also pregnant herself then.

C.E. was very kind and solicitous for the child and his wife. It seemed to me that all the time that they were expecting the child, he was very happy. They started housekeeping at 75th Street West and Detroit Avenue, in the Ottman block. They had a 5-room apartment, where they lived for about a year and a half or two years. Then they moved to an apartment up on Madison Avenue near West 81st Street.

My wife and I and the Walkers and the Ruthenbergs all had a child about the same time. We visited together frequently. The women talked about children, things to cook, how to get along, and so forth. His relations with Rose were pleasant and he never started a quarrel.

C.E. was an aristocrat in bearing, aloof from the mob. A purely intellectual urge motivated him. He smarted at defeat in debate and studied assiduously. It was counter to his nature to be defeated at anything. Those who knew him well could hardly believe he would associate with the mob, or that he would have anything in common with them.