

Anna Strunsky: From Russia with Love

The park is a destination point for many Russians and our Russian visitors are often amazingly knowledgeable about Jack, both his writings and his life. They often bring up Jack's early love, a Russian woman named Anna Strunsky. Here's her story.

Anna was unlike anyone Jack had ever met. Jack described her as a Russian Jewess who was "the most brilliant woman I have ever known." He found her to be ". . . deep, subtle, and psychological . . . neither stiff nor formal . . . a joy and delight . . . who has absorbed Western culture, and who warms it with a certain oriental leaven." According to Joseph Noel,¹ Anna "had soft brown eyes, a kindly smile and a throaty little voice that did things to your spine." Charmian found her to be "wide-hearted" with "a deep and lasting loyalty" saying: "Every one loved Anna, women as well as men; no one could resist the drawing power of her, she the Much-Desired."

Anna was born on March 21, 1877 in Russia. When she was 9 years old, her family left their home in rural Babinots, in western Russia,² and immigrated to the U.S. so that Anna's three older brothers would not be forced into Russian military service. Initially the family settled in New York city where Anna was featured in the New York Herald as P.S. 49's "brightest student." When Anna was a young teen, they moved to San Francisco where her father ran a successful liquor business.

Anna graduated from Lowell High School in 1896. As a young woman she encountered all manner of people coming in and out of their home, describing the experience as "the best school," and obtaining more from this vast array of personalities "than I have ever got out of books or halls of learning."³ The Strunsky family, "with its arms-around hospitality, its long table always laid for a problematical number of interesting guests . . . stamped its intelligence and its loveliness and its charm" upon all who entered, including Jack. Anna continued her education at both Stanford and University of California, Berkeley.⁴

Jack and Anna met in the fall of 1899 at a lecture by Austin Lewis, a socialist and labor lawyer, commemorating the Paris Commune of 1871⁵, held at the Old Turk Street Temple in San Francisco.⁶

¹ Joseph Noel was a friend of Jack's; he was a fellow novelist and newspaperman. He wrote the book, *Footloose in Arcadia*, about Jack, George Sterling, Ambrose Bierce, among others. Noel and Jack had a falling out over movie rights.

² Now part of Belarus.

³ Among these people were refugees, intellectuals, and people like "Red Emma," anarchist Emma Goldman, and socialist Daniel DeLeon, forefather of the idea of revolutionary industrial unionism and co-founder of the Industrial Workers of the World.

⁴ Most sources show her receiving an A.B. Degree from Stanford in 1900. According to biographer Boylan, however, Stanford records show her being suspended in 1898 after passing only one course, in the History of the French Revolution, in fall of her junior year. Boylan states that while her academic records are unclear as to what happened after the suspension, her diary indicates a later return to Stanford, possibly to complete some coursework left "deferred" or incomplete from earlier. Speculation varies on the cause of her academic collapse. During this time Anna experienced the death of a close friend, her history teacher, whom she referred to as her "sweetheart mother." Anna writes about feeling "tortured" at Stanford, and though no specifics are given, being female and Jewish might well have played a part. Stasz suggests "she was committed less to school than to socialism." In her memoirs, Emma Goldman initially wrote that Anna was suspended for improperly receiving a male visitor but later retracted that statement. At UCB, Anna was registered as a nondegree student. Jack wrote Anna a conciliatory letter in January 1900 stating that one should not be measured by a "college career and record but by a whole life, in which the former plays no part save that of preparing." His letter suggests she did not complete her degree.

⁵ The Paris Commune of 1871 was a short-lived revolutionary government that ruled Paris for a few weeks from March 18th to May 28th of 1871. The Commune ended child labor, supported worker rights and cooperatives, remitted rents, opposed the death penalty, believed in separation of church and state, among other things.

⁶ Anna could not remember if it was Cameron King or Frank Strawn-Hamilton who introduced her to Jack at this event.

Jack was 23 and Anna 22. Prior to this, just as Jack had been dubbed “the boy Socialist,” the S.F. Examiner had dubbed the teen Anna as the “Girl Socialist of San Francisco;” it was inevitable their paths would cross.

Anna would later call Jack a “Napoleon of the Pen,”⁷ describing him as seeming “at once younger and older than his years . . . the body of the athlete and the mind of the thinker . . . as if I were meeting in their youth, Las[s]alle, Karl Marx or Byron, so instantly did I feel that I was in the presence of a historical character.” “His smile was warm and bright and his mouth opening in its ready laugh revealed an absence of two or three upper front teeth which only accentuated . . . the boyishness of his appearance.”

After meeting Anna, Jack wrote: “Seems as if I have known you for an age – you and your Mr. Browning.”⁸ He described her as someone able “to feel the deeps and the heights of emotion . . . who can grasp the intensity of transcendental feeling . . .” Jack courted Anna with flowers, poems, books, and mentored her in her writing. Jack visited Anna at her home,⁹ he shared his views on Darwin and Spencer, they watched Shakespeare and Ibsen in theatres, hung out with “the Crowd,”¹⁰ went for long walks on the beach and in the hills, and read Browning, Woodsworth, Dante, and other authors together.

Anna was not afraid to call Jack out on his bad behavior. After Jack sent Anna a story he had written about a Jewish man, Jaky, Anna told Jack “[n]ot all Jews haggle and bargain,” critical of his stereotyping. Although London apologized, he insisted that he was not antisemitic and that the story was based on a real person.¹¹ In another letter, Jack is apologizing once again, writing “[y]ou had me on the hip, and scored hard. And I deserved it, every bit. It’s wrong to make excuses . . .”¹² For his part, Jack saw Anna more as a dreamer than a doer, and encouraged her to follow through on her writing.¹³

Soon their friendship grew into something more. By January of 1900, Jack had started off a letter in his usual formal, “Dear Miss Strunsky” only to write under it: “O Pshaw! Dear Anna: -”. She must have reciprocated with an informal “Dear Jack,” because on February 20th, Jack humorously wrote: “Now I feel comfortable. Nobody ever ‘Mr. London’s me, so every time I opened a letter of yours I felt a starched collar draw round my neck. Pray permit me soften neck-gear for the remainder of our

⁷ NB: Charmian reprints letters from Anna in her biography of Jack and “Napoleon of the Pen” is taken from one of these letters. The phrase has been associated with Jack and used by other authors. (e.g., Tichi devotes one entire chapter to the “Napoleon of the Pen,” citing to Charmian’s book.) However, Anna reported being “exasperated” by Charmian’s book and “unhappy about misquotations in [her] letters . . .” Without knowing her specific objections or viewing the letters, it’s hard to know their accuracy.

⁸ He was referring to Robert Browning, poet and playwright.

⁹ Jack called the Strunskys his “Love Family.” (The family included: Anna’s parents, Elias and Anna Hurowich Strunsky; brothers Albert, Mooris, Max (an orthopedic surgeon), and Hyman (a magazine and newspaper writer); and a younger sister Rose, described by Charmian as “uncommonly brilliant” and “no less remarkable than Anna.” Rose would later become the subject of Sinclair Lewis’s unrequited love; he wrote many unpublished poems about her. Rose was also engaged for a time to Jack’s friend and artist, Xavier Martinez. Martinez painted a portrait of her.

¹⁰ The Crowd was an informal literary group that hung out at places like Coppa’s in San Francisco and will soon be the the subject of a Jack’s Facts.

¹¹ Elsie Martinez (wife of Xavier Martinez) stated that Jack said he would never marry Anna because she was a Semite. Even if he had such initial reservations, Jack did eventually propose.

¹² Earle Labor begins his biography of Jack with this quote from Anna: “It is easy to criticize him, of course, because his faults are large and obvious, but it is much more profitable to get on the inside of him and sympathize with his outlook on life.”

¹³ Like Jack, some scholars believe Anna also suffered from depression which could have affected her productivity.

correspondence.” The letters grew more intimate and in time Jack began them with “Dear You,” and signed “Sahib.”¹⁴

By spring of 1900, and by most accounts, Jack had marriage on his mind. As the two rested from a bicycle trip in the Berkeley hills and Jack began to reveal his feelings, stroking her hair and asking about her future plans, the awkwardness and immaturity of youth took over. Anna, nervous, feared she would appear unladylike because her flushed cheeks and unsteady voice were revealing her true feelings for Jack. She would later reflect that “[y]outh says one thing and means another.” She pulled back and spoke about returning to Russia. She wrote about it years later in “novelistic terms:” “on a hilltop in California, his hand straying over her loosened hair . . . If he had asked her to marry him, sitting there on that knoll, the book on her lap, she might have thrown her young arms around his neck, pressing her head against his shoulder . . . He did not ask her . . .”

Biographers speculate that Jack, interpreting Anna’s coyness as rejection, was spurred into proposing just days later to his former math tutor, Bess Maddern, with whom he was not in love. No doubt Anna was shocked to receive the news. Jack replied to her apparent note of congratulations on April 6, 1900, thanking her for her letter and saying how happy he was to receive it, explaining: “It was rather sudden. I always do things that way. . . I think myself justified in making this marriage. It will not, however, interfere much with my old life or my life as I planned it for the future.” Jack and Bess married on April 7, 1900.

Indeed, the marriage did not interfere. He continued his friendship with Anna, collaborating with her on the book, *The Kempton-Wace Letters*.¹⁵ In their book, Anna takes on the persona of Dane Kempton, an older poet, who champions romantic, passionate love, while Jack became Herbert Wace, a young scientist arguing for a rational, Darwinian view of marriage as a practical contract based on biology or species propagation. Kempton/Anna and Wace/Jack wrote letters to one another defending their respective positions: emotion versus science. Jack/Wace saw emotional love as a type of unnecessary madness. That Jack’s own marriage was devoid of such “madness” and fit well into Wace’s clinical, Darwinian view, escaped no one.¹⁶

This collaboration and the writing of his “Wace” letters provided both a way for Jack to continue to justify his love-less marriage and to keep his real love, Anna, close. Too close as it would happen because he could no longer repress his feelings, writing in May of 1901, “[m]y heart was full of you all evening.” A few months later, he wrote “I should like some time to be with you so long as to be sated; then I would not be hungry when you went away. I look straight out my window to where you live, you know, and it is a distraction.”¹⁷ Anna stayed with Jack and Bess for a time while working on the book. Bess would later claim that when Anna was with them, Bess found Anna sitting on Jack’s lap. Bess also said that Anna and Jack would be up early, sequestered in his study until breakfast, and then after breakfast, they would disappear into the nearby woods all day. Bess named Anna as the cause

¹⁴ “Sahib” is of Arabic origin but also commonly used in Persian and Indian cultures. It means “companion” or “friend,” and can also refer to someone who possesses authority, such as a master or owner, similar to “sir” or “mister.” One scholar suggests Jack’s use of an Arabic word shows his willingness to accept or be part of Anna’s “semitic” world. Others discuss how his relationship with Anna challenged his evolving views of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

¹⁵ Anna holds a unique position as Jack’s co-author. Their book was initially published anonymously in 1903 to a “feeble reception.” A Buffalo paper praised it but the NYT was less charitable.

¹⁶ More than one biographer credits Jack with saying (as part of his view that marriage should be based on biology or propagation of the species) that he wanted to raise “seven sturdy Saxon sons” or “seven sturdy Saxon sons and seven beautiful daughters.” However, this appears to have been taken from Rose Wilder’s *fictionalized* “biography” of Jack.

¹⁷ They were corresponding and visiting between their homes in San Francisco and Oakland.

for the divorce in her divorce papers.¹⁸ In May of 1902, and while still married to Bess, Jack proposed to Anna, asking her to run away with him to Australia or New Zealand and start a new life together.

Anna initially said yes to Jack's marriage proposal but then two things happened. First, she talked it over with her mother. Anna's mother reminded Anna of the hardship of a divorce on Bess and her daughter, Joan, as well as the scandal that would engulf Anna. After this motherly chat, Anna told Jack that while she loved him deeply, she did not feel she "loved him enough" for marriage; she was afraid to take her "happiness at the expense of his wife and baby." Neither Jack nor Anna seemed to treat this rejection seriously and they continued to write lovingly to one another (with Jack writing in June of 1902, "I am sick with love for you and need of you.")

The second thing to happen is what ended the romance for good. While Jack was in London the summer of 1902, writing *People of the Abyss*, Anna found out Bess was pregnant with Becky. This latest news must have infuriated her given Jack's letter in response. While we do not have the benefit of her letter to him, we can surmise its content from his reply. Jack was "worn out & exhausted," his nerves "blunted" when he received Anna's "Dear John" letter. He had walked all night with the homeless of London's East End "in the bitter rain, and, drenched to the skin," and then spent the next morning "in the fierce struggle for something to eat." He wrote more than one letter, telling her that she was "one of the cruelest women I have ever know[n]," refuting that "I have insulted your love by lying to you," insisting he had not lied (about his marriage being over.) He told her "to work back nine months," and he indicated it was just sex, saying "if you have a superficial knowledge of things sexual and physiological, you will fail to discover any lie."¹⁹ Jack continued that "the Sahib is dead . . ." and that her "frightful letter" had "given me the most astounding blues I have ever experienced." He described it as a knock-out punch to a prize fighter with "blows landing upon him from above, below and every side, and his own arms flying out madly, blindly, threshing the air crazily. . . And now it is all over and done with. So be it. Henceforth I shall dream romances for other people and transmute them into bread & butter."

He re-read her letter "over a score of times. I am quite lost & breathless each time I lay it down." Anna apparently regretted sending off such a harsh rejection to Jack because later Jack sent her a letter about how happy he was to hear from her, even though he chided her for writing only about "the news." Still abroad, their letters crossed in the mail, with Jack writing, "[w]hat rot this long-distance correspondence is! About the time you are receiving harsh letters from me, I am receiving the kindest letters from you."

The romance was gone but their friendship endured for the rest of Jack's life.²⁰ Anna became friends with Charmian as well. Jack continued to visit with Anna and her family members when on the East

¹⁸ By the time of the divorce in 1905, Jack was in love with Charmian and Anna had been wrongly named as "the other woman."

¹⁹ Jack was saying that Becky, born in October, had been conceived long before Jack proposed to Anna in May 1902.

²⁰ Kingman makes the claim that "Anna was never in love with Jack, but always had the deepest respect for him." It's hard to know how Kingman reached this conclusion. According to an interview Earle Labor conducted with Anna's daughter, her "[m]other never stopped loving [Jack.]" Jack himself refers to Anna's love for him when asking her to follow up with publishers on their book ("As you love me, do not put it off . . .") Clarice Stasz wrote that Anna's unfinished biography of Jack leaves little doubt that Anna "was equally impassioned and wanted to marry him." Earle Labor and Kenneth Brandt each discuss Anna falling in love with Jack at first sight. Elsie Martinez said Anna was very much in love with Jack although the "Crowd" believed her when she said there had been no (physical) affair. Kingman may have been relying upon Anna's own writing that "twice in my life did I awaken to true love," where she referred to two men, neither being Jack. Anna also wrote to her friend, Katia Maryson, around the time of Jack's divorce, ". . . I think we do not love each other but I may be slandering a supreme feeling in thinking so." She wrote the same friend upon hearing of Jack's marriage to Charmian that "The heart has gone out of me since I have deserted Jack. There is not a thought for him, not

Coast, either alone or with Charmian. Anna and Charmian continued their friendship and visited with one another after Jack's death.

Anna returned to Russia for a time, lectured on social and literary topics, and wrote another book, *Violette of Pere Lachaise*, about a young girl coming of age. She married wealthy labor reformer and socialist William English Walling in 1906, in France, with her sister, Rose, and Marx's grandson serving as witnesses.²¹ She and William had four children and in 1932 William filed for a Mexican divorce, but Anna refused to acknowledge the marriage was over. William died in 1936. She and William were instrumental in the formation of the NAACP, after reporting on the Springfield, Illinois race riots. Anna participated in many social causes including with the Quakers, the War Resisters League, the League for Mutual Aid, the American League to Abolish Capital Punishment, among others.

In her "Memoirs of Jack London" published in 1917 after Jack's death, she starts with a quote from one of his 1899 letters to her:

"Take me this way: a stray guest, a bird of passage, splashing with salt-rimmed wings through a brief moment of your life – a rude and blundering bird, used to large airs and great spaces, unaccustomed to the amenities of confined existence."

She goes on to call Jack "youth, adventure, romance" with "sincerity" as his greatest trait.²²

We were fortunate to have Anna deliver a speech in the 1960 dedication of our Jack London State Historic Park. Anna lived to be almost 87; she died on February 25th 1964, in New York. She never finished her book about Jack and her unpublished manuscript remains at the Yale Library.

Anna's daughter said that her mother carried a miniature portrait of Jack in her purse throughout her life.

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a clinging regret." "Please do not think me unhappy. I . . . do not myself want Jack's love. I am quite estranged from him." Whatever Kingman's reasoning, he is in the minority in his belief.

²¹Ironically, turning Jack's proposal down did not save Anna from the scandal her mother warned her about. Prior to her marriage to William, she became the focus of Jack's divorce when Bess named her in the divorce papers. Even Jack's publisher, George Brett, wanted to know if the newspaper reports that the *Kempton-Wace Letters* had caused Jack's separation from Bess were true; Jack assured him they had nothing to do with it. When asked, Anna reportedly told the press these were silly stories about her and Jack, that he behaved properly during their collaboration and that he was "blindly in love with his wife."

²² The rest of her "Memoirs" is available on the Volunteer Resources Webpage.

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