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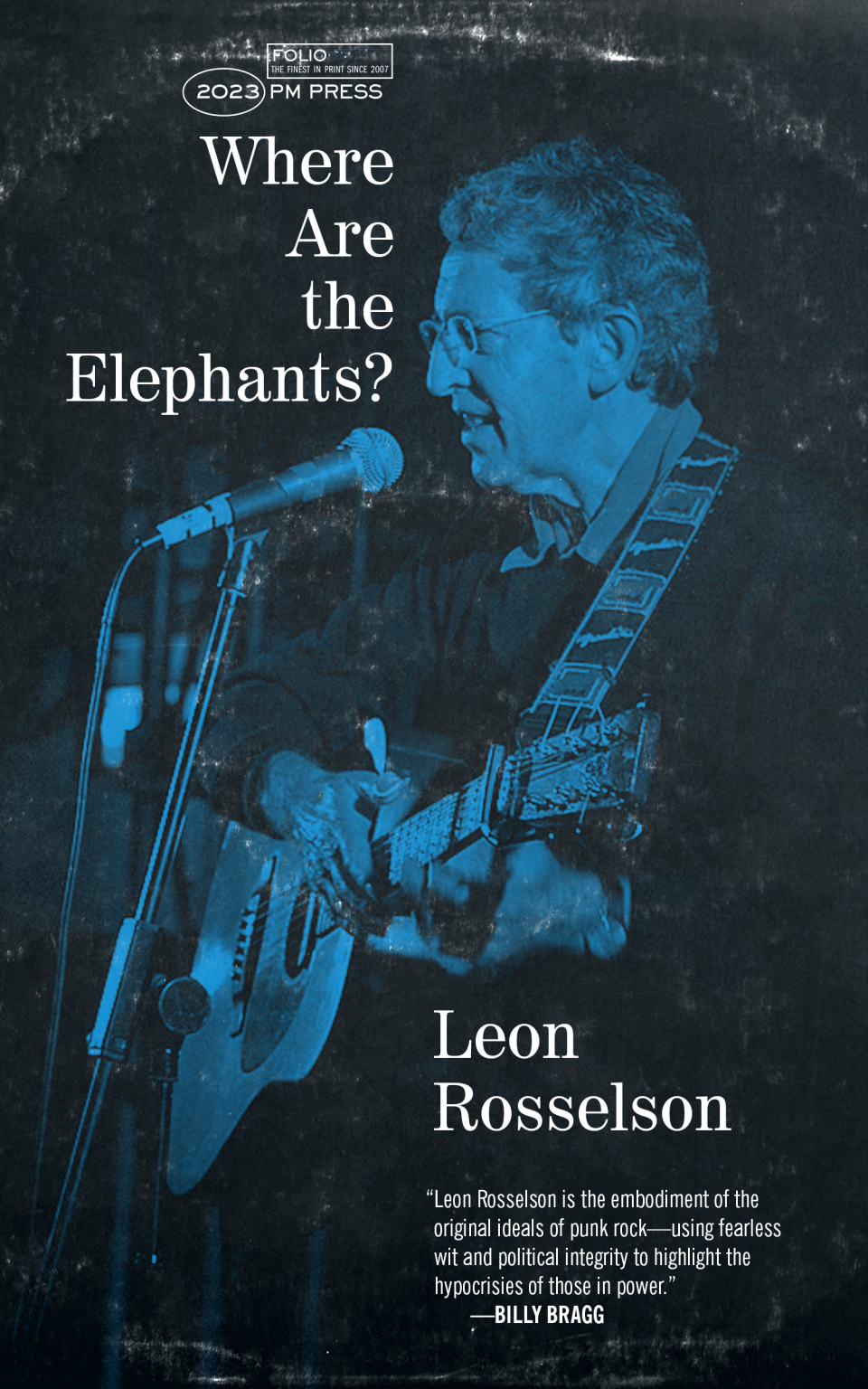
Where Are the Elephants?



Leon Rosselson

"Leon Rosselson is the embodiment of the original ideals of punk rock—using fearless wit and political integrity to highlight the hypocrisies of those in power."

—**BILLY BRAGG**

'In many ways, Leon Rosselson is the embodiment of the original ideals of punk rock. His hair isn't spiky, but his music is, using fearless wit and political integrity to highlight the hypocrisies of those in power. Alone among the great British songwriters of the past sixty years, Leon has sought to make art that stays true to Karl Marx's demand that we should concern ourselves with the ruthless criticism of all that exists.'

—Billy Bragg

'Rosselson remains fearless. He provides something that the world is in dire need of currently—dissent that seeks dialogue versus greater division and disconnection.'

—Ian Brennan, Grammy-winning music producer and author, *Silenced by Sound* and *Muse-Sick: a music meritocracy in fifty-nine notes*

'Leon Rosselson's *Where Are the Elephants?* is a fascinating mixture of autobiography, critical inquiry, and polemic, spanning his long life as a musician, author, and revolutionary. Rosselson's rich experience is the basis for profound insights on many themes central to an appraisal of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. From folk music and songwriting to communism and anti-semitism, from protest and demonstration to rancorous political debate, Rosselson weighs in, not as an observer, but as a participant. His is the testimony of an engaged artist dedicated to his craft and the struggle against suffering and injustice. Anyone interested in music, England, Jewish identity in opposition to Zionism, critical takes on Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, or Jesus and Judas Iscariot, this book is for you. And lest it be forgotten in the breadth of its subject matter, *Where Are the Elephants?* is exemplary as autobiography: the sharing of a full life with grace and humility.'

—Mat Callahan, musician and author of *Working-Class Heroes: A History of Struggle in Song*

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PM

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My thanks to all those who have supported and contributed to my songwriting life and in particular to Frankie Armstrong, Roy Bailey, Billy Bragg, Martin Carthy, Chris Foster, Robb Johnson, Ramsey Kanaan, Reem Kelani, Nancy Kerr, Sandra Kerr, Elizabeth Mansfield, Marisa Orth-Pallavicini, Rina Rosselson, Janet Russell, Ian Saville, Fiz Shapur.

For Rina, with love

True, I don't wear my heart upon my sleeve
(which doesn't mean, of course, I haven't got one).
And though I have my faults (so you believe)
emotional incontinence is not one.
My love for you I may not always show
(which doesn't mean to say that I don't feel it).
And sometimes I cause hurt and then I'm slow
to find my way to the words I need to heal it.
And, as for hugs, you'll doubt it but I mean
to give you two a day at least. And yet
I know they are too few and far between.
Despite my best intentions, I forget.
But still, please note, for this is also true
I've penned this heartfelt sonnet just for you.

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Communism, or Where Are the Elephants?

'The most radical humanist vision that ever existed … communism promised to wipe out every form of exploitation, oppression, discrimination and violence.'

—Michael Brie

'Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.'

—William Morris

'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when it lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias.'

—Oscar Wilde

As I remember it, on the morning of my seventh birthday, 22 June 1941, my father opened the door of our flat in Tufnell Park to the Co-op milkman who delivered the usual pint bottle of milk together with the news that Nazi Germany had attacked the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa. At first, my father refused to believe it. I didn't understand why. I suppose,

as a devout follower of the Soviet Union, he could not admit to himself that Stalin might have made a mistake in assuming that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact, which, of course, my father supported, would protect the Soviet Union from a German attack. When the news was confirmed, he declared that this signaled the end for Hitler's Germany. He had no doubts at all. Communism was unvanquishable.

At that time we couldn't read our family's newspaper of choice, the Communist *Daily Worker*, because it had been banned for following the Comintern line that the war should be opposed as an imperialist war. Some in the leadership of the Communist Party were appalled by this decision, notably Harry Pollitt whose name I often heard bandied about in discussions and arguments at home. Now, with the attack on the Soviet Union, the CP decreed that overnight the war had become a people's war and members were urged to support it without reservation.

I spent much of those childhood years, when I wasn't being evacuated, hovering over the wireless at home, listening to the BBC news and plotting the course of the battles on the Eastern Front. During those terrible early months of defeat and retreat when it looked certain that the Soviet Army would be overrun, my father's confidence never seemed to waver. These were tactical retreats, luring the enemy to their doom. In my memory, my mother's main contribution to the family discussions was to swear at Hitler and his Nazis in Yiddish.

Then came the Nazis' failure to take Leningrad, followed by the failure of its offensive against Moscow.

The *Daily Worker* was, to great rejoicing in our house, unbanned in September 1942 so we no longer had to rely on the capitalist BBC for our news. And we could read, day after day, month after month, our paper's extraordinary reports on the Battle of Stalingrad, the courage, the heroism, the sacrifices of the ordinary Russian soldiers, and the ultimate crushing defeat of Hitler's invaders. The Red Army—our

Red Army—had prevailed, just as my father had predicted. This was the turning point of the war, as even the capitalist press and Winston Churchill had to acknowledge, for we were no longer alone in our admiration for Soviet Russia and its heroic army.

It's difficult to fully appreciate even now the terrible losses, the appalling destruction suffered by Russia in the war. Some twenty-five million dead and a country laid waste. At the time, I think I was too agitated, too excited by reading and hearing about the battles and the defeats and the victories to be upset by the slaughter and the suffering.

My parents, as far as I can remember, never told me what to think or what I should believe. But then, of course, they didn't need to. Fuzzy images from my growing-up life still linger in my brain: a small girl hands a bouquet of flowers to a smiling Uncle Joe; happy peasant women sing as they march off to reap the golden wheat fields; a heroic Stakhanovite worker, glowing with pride, bears aloft the red flag; a group of red-scarved Komsomol children gaze into a radiant future.

And then there were the songs. I can still sing them, though the lyrics may have fragmented a bit. That old Russian Civil War song, revived in the war against Nazi Germany:

With Budyonny to lead us for the cause that had freed us
We swept forward by night and by day.
Soon our fame rode before us like a thundering chorus
As the army that never gave way.

Many of those old Bolshevik military leaders had been murdered by Stalin in the purges of the 1930s, but I didn't know that then.

I was beguiled by *Salute to Life*, with an uplifting tune by Shostakovich:

The wind has a breath of the morning
Then meet it with banners unfurled.

Let joy be your clarion, comrade,
We march in the dawn of the world.
Then, comrades, face the wind, salute
The rising sun.
Our country turns towards the dawn
New life's begun.

How could I resist that vision of a glorious future?

To complete my education, I was given books that no school friend of mine had ever read. Red diaper babies, as they're called in the United States, would have been fed a diet of Howard Fast's children's books. The English equivalent was Geoffrey Trease. I was thrilled by *Bows against the Barons*, a Marxist version of the Robin Hood story, in which Robin's vision of 'an England without masters' is betrayed, but, as Little John says, 'we'll go on working to make Robin's dream come true.' In *Missing from Home*, a teenage brother and sister run away from their middle-class home and learn about the class war by helping factory workers win a strike. *Red Comet*—two English children visit the happy wonderland of the Soviet Union in the 1930s—was somewhat lifeless and too didactic for my tastes but I liked a book called *Eddie and the Gypsy*, by a German writer, which explained Marx's theory of surplus value by way of fishing and who owns the catch. Apart from *Eddie and the Gypsy*, which sadly I lost somewhere, I still have these books, somewhat tattered now but so evocative of my growing-up time.

Was I being brainwashed? No more so than any other boy or girl who attended school, Cubs, Scouts, church, synagogue, or Girl Guides and read comics and Biggles books. I was absorbing ideas and a certain narrative: that the way the world was set up was unfair; that some had too much and others too little; that the powerful made the rules to benefit themselves; that we were Jews and so should always be on the side of the oppressed; and that somewhere over

the rainbow there was a sunlit land 'so dear to every toiler,' as the song said, where life was lived differently, where all had equal worth and led lives of peace, harmony, and comradeship. In short, I was being enlisted in the ranks of the Opposition to What Is.

Our Jewishness centred on food rather than religion. My mother, brought up in the Jewish East End of London, cooked the traditional Ashkenazi dishes to accompany the Jewish festivals and sent me to school with sandwiches made with what she called 'gribenes' (schmaltz and fried onions), which, she assured me, would keep me warm in the cold winter months. They, along with my mother's homemade hamantaschen, were my favourites.

In the run-up to the election of 1950, the headmaster of my school, an all-boys grammar situated on the edge of Parliament Hill and Hampstead Heath, announced that the school would be holding a mock election while the real election was taking place. This, he said, would be an education in how democracy works. By this time, the Communist Party was thoroughly disillusioned with Attlee's Labour government, attacking it for its austerity and anti-strike policies, its rearmament programme, its anti-Soviet Cold War stance, its anti-Communist purges, its decision to ally Britain with the United States and NATO. So, partly as a provocation but also because all the political parties except for the Communist Party were represented, I decided, in the interests of democracy, to nominate myself as the Communist candidate. The reaction was swift. On the headmaster's orders, I was banned. My name was removed from the list. That was my first lesson in democracy.

I was never given an explanation. I think the fear was that, boys being boys and instinctively anti-authoritarian and snook-cocking, I might win the election and the *Daily Mirror* might get wind of it and, in the context of the anti-Soviet, anti-Communist scare campaign, a hollow echo of

the hysterical red-baiting infecting America, that would be a stain on the honour of the school.

I don't remember the result of the school election, but in the real election, Labour won with a much-reduced majority. The following year, they were voted out of office. We then had thirteen years of Tory rule. So much for the Parliamentary Road to Socialism.

The Cold War jitterbug was now in full swing. It was time to take sides. There were the peace-loving socialist countries on one side of the Iron Curtain and war-mongering America and its acolytes on the other. Or there was totalitarian communism on one side and the free world on the other. Peace or freedom. Take your choice. We—communists and fellow travellers—lined up behind the peace banner. 'Ain't gonna study war no more,' we sang. And: 'A mighty song of peace will soon be ringing.' We felt betrayed by the Labour Party's decision to develop the nuclear bomb—one 'with the bloody Union Jack on top of it,' as Ernest Bevin so delicately phrased it. This made us a prime target in any future nuclear war. Peaceful coexistence was the imperative. In the words of Vern Partlow's 'Old Man Atom':

If you're scared of the A-bomb, I'll tell you what to do
You got to get with all the people in the world with you
You got to get together and let out a yell
Or the first thing you know we'll blow this world to …

It wasn't that I was opposed to freedom, but what was the point of freedom if we were all going to be incinerated? And what sort of freedom was it, anyway, that murdered Ethel and Julius Rosenberg?

Sporting events also required us to take sides. Emil Zatopek's triple gold in the Helsinki Olympic Games of 1952 was a thrilling achievement but doubly thrilling in that he represented what a small country could achieve under socialism. And when my home team, Arsenal, lost 5–0 to

Moscow Dynamo in a friendly match, it was surely a sign that communist football was the future.

We had to cope with and combat daily attacks on the Soviet Union and its allies by the capitalist press. More disturbing were the ugly rumours swirling around about antisemitism in the Soviet Union. Some were asking about Mikhoels and the celebrated Moscow State Yiddish Theatre company. What had happened to them? My father was having none of it. After all, hadn't the Soviet Union instituted the first Jewish autonomous territory? It was called Birobidzhan, national language Yiddish, and it had given us a song, something about a Jewish collective farm, with a jolly chorus: *Hey Zhan, hey Zhankoye, hey Zhanvili, hey Zhankoye*. In the 1960s, everyone from Pete Seeger to the Limeliters was singing it, though the heyday of this Jewish entity with its collective farms and women tractor drivers was long gone.

Then there was the Slánský trial in Czechoslovakia. Thirteen Communist Party bureaucrats, ten of them Jewish, accused of a Zionist imperialist conspiracy. What were we to think? Most of my friends in Hashomer Hatzair dismissed the accusations as a fabrication. A few worried that they could be true, casting doubt on their Zionist beliefs. The Doctors' Plot was another unpleasant pill to swallow, but, in the event, we needn't have swallowed it since it turned out, after Stalin's death in March 1953, to have been another fabrication.

So by November 1954, when, as a representative of the University Socialist Club (a Communist front organisation), I joined a youth delegation to the Soviet Union, my faith in the goodness of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was being tested. What's more, Wolverhampton Wanderers had just beaten Moscow Spartak 4–0, thus undermining my confidence in the superiority of communist football.

The delegation comprised a number of trade unionists, Quakers, students, Christians, one from the YCL (the Young

Communist League), a couple of Young Liberals, and at least one Tory. Most were in their mid to late twenties. I was the youngest. Some, especially the Young Liberals, came with their political prejudices on high alert, determined to find fault. Others were more open-minded, prepared to put their preconceived ideas on hold.

I decided to dump my doubts and prepared myself to defend the Soviet system against the inevitable criticisms and snide questions. Why are elderly ladies the only ones clearing the Moscow streets of snow? Why does everyone wear such drab clothes? Why, if this is a classless society, are there four classes in the trains? Why were some of the group detained by the militia for taking photos of decaying houses in the old part of Moscow? Since factory workers are on a piece-rate system, isn't there a conflict of interest between workers and management?

I had formulated two main lines of defence: that it was only nine years after a war that had devastated the country, destroyed its main cities, and killed over twenty million people; that, contrary to popular opinion, the Soviet Union did not claim to be a communist society. It was on the road to communism but passing through the socialist stage, expressed in the slogan 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his work.'

For the higher phase of communism, the slogan, coined by Marx, was 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.' I hoped I'd remembered that correctly and could, if pushed, explain the difference. As for the expected attacks on Stalin as a ruthless dictator, I could reply that, if the Russians thought he had oppressed them, they showed it in a strange way by queuing outside his tomb to pay homage to him.

Accompanied by our student interpreter guides (doubtless spying for the secret service, asserted the Young Liberals), we visited Moscow, Leningrad, Georgia, the Bolshoi, the