FAMOUS FORGOTTEN RADICAL

BY RICHARD GAZARIK

Jacob Margolis.
Courtesy of Ron Schuler, from the upcoming book
The Steel Bar: Pittsburgh Lawyers and
the Making of Modern America.
Attorney Jacob Margolis was an anarchist, an atheist, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, and Pittsburgh’s most prominent radical in the 1920s until he was disbarred as an attorney for his political beliefs. He opposed World War I, the draft, capitalism, trade unions, and the legal profession whose members he called “grafters.”

“I’m a Bolshevik ... And I don’t care who knows it,” he once proclaimed. Margolis’ clientele included anarchist Emma Goldman; her lover Alexander Berkman, the would-be assassin of Henry Clay Frick; and Big Bill Haywood, the one-eyed leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He also was associated with William Z. Foster, a syndicalist and radical labor organizer who led the nationwide 1919 steel strike from his Pittsburgh headquarters. Because he was a Jew, the Scots-Irish Presbyterians, who dominated Pittsburgh’s legal, financial, and political fields, treated Margolis as an outsider. The Allegheny County Bar Association would not allow him to join its ranks, and then after it did, instigated disbarment proceedings against him because of his political beliefs.

The political climate in Pittsburgh encouraged a state of mind among the public and government officials that saw reason replaced by hate, fear, and intolerance. Margolis defied the stereotype of a radical, a label affixed to anyone who strayed from conventional thought. He was not the wild-eyed anarchist bent on bombings and the violent overthrow of the government. He defended free speech, members of the IWW, and members of the Union of Russian Workers who faced deportation. But he paid a price for his advocacy, spending years in legal limbo as an attorney unable to practice law and kept under scrutiny by a government that considered him dangerous.

In the early years of the 20th century, America was suffering from a severe case of xenophobia. The IWW gained new members among immigrants who were driven to join its ranks by harsh working conditions and low pay. Labor and management were at odds, and radicals and leftists felt they could take advantage of worker discontent through strikes. Many Americans viewed these foreigners suspiciously because of the revolutions that were going on in their native countries. A report on the 1919 strike described these aliens as “Physically powerful men, with dark or dirty faces, with heavy brows or long moustaches in whose former
homelands strange political events are going on, these men are feared because nothing is known about them.\textsuperscript{76}

When WWI ended, demobilization created a tight job market as Pittsburgh shifted from wartime to peacetime production. Ex-soldiers competed with foreigners for work, and inflation and a high cost of living forced labor to become more aggressive in demanding higher wages. When their requests were ignored, workers went on strike. Margolis and the left became targets of government surveillance because of unrest among foreign workers. Rational-thinking Americans were transformed into rabid nationalists. Businessmen, wanting to protect their investments, viewed these foreigners as nationalists. Margolis, who helped organize the rally, claimed that authorities persuaded Homewood businessmen to file complaints with the police as a pretext to break up the gathering.\textsuperscript{12} They were afraid, Margolis alleged, this “contagion might spread and do irreparable damage. Free speech is a valuable asset. To be deprived of it means that secret methods must be employed and the latter are hardly every successful.”\textsuperscript{13}

The Homewood demonstration cemented Margolis’ credentials as a leader of the radical movement in Pittsburgh. When he was not practicing law, Margolis was agitating on behalf of labor. He urged striking miners in Washington County to “prepare and equip yourselves to take over these industries and mines.”\textsuperscript{14} In 1913, he helped Pittsburgh cigar workers form a chapter of the IWW.\textsuperscript{15} In 1915, Margolis staged a rally at Montefiore Hall in Pittsburgh to raise money for the defendants charged with blowing up the Times Building in Los Angeles. He defended one of the bombers, David Caplan, before withdrawing from the case over trial strategy disputes and the client’s lack of money to pay the attorneys.\textsuperscript{16}

Margolis attracted the attention of the fledgling Bureau of Investigation, which later became the FBI, after bureau agents infiltrated the IWW while Margolis was serving as the group’s attorney.\textsuperscript{17} Even though Margolis identified himself as a member of the IWW, he disavowed their violent methods.

Jacob Margolis was born on Magee Street in Pittsburgh’s Hill District in 1886. He was influenced at an early age by the political currents surrounding him in his neighborhood, which was a radical hotbed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Jewish immigrants living on the Hill were politically active and quick to stage protests if they thought they were being treated unfairly. When landlords increased the rent for apartments, 500 tenants protested and demanded that city council pass an ordinance against rent profiteering.\textsuperscript{18} When Jewish-owned bakeries increased the price of a loaf of bread by a penny, 3,000 Jewish women picketed the bakeries to prevent anyone from entering the stores.\textsuperscript{19} The Hill District also was a favorite meeting place for radical groups such as the Union of Russian Workers and an assortment of anarchists. After McKinley’s assassination on September 6, 1901, there was a public outcry for authorities to rid the city of the radicals nesting in the Hill.\textsuperscript{20}

Margolis’ parents were among the 30,000 Jews who flooded Pittsburgh from Russia at the end of the 19th century. They arrived in Pittsburgh via the B&O Railroad carrying their possessions and bedding on their backs. As many as 3,000 immigrants arrived each day in Pittsburgh to escape pogroms underway in Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{21} Margolis was a short, slightly built man who weighed about 150 pounds. He had dark eyes, black hair, and a large forehead. He was smart, articulate, and

Anarchist Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman
National Archives and Records Administration
Record Group 165.533643.
RATIONAL-THINKING AMERICANS WERE TRANSFORMED INTO RABID NATIONALISTS
ambitious.  

He also fancied himself a “street corner orator.”  

He attended Franklin Public School in the Hill District and graduated in 1904 from Pittsburgh Central High School, then attended Washington & Jefferson College for one year before quitting and finishing his law degree at the University of Pittsburgh, and being admitted to the bar in 1910.

As Margolis’ reputation grew as a prominent member of the radical community, the Ku Klux Klan issued death threats against him. The Klan warned Margolis to temper his radical rhetoric or the “radical element will be looking for another Jew to defend them at their next trial, as we loyal red-blooded American citizens intend to … if necessary kill off those who are so depraved as to preach revolution within our border, and don’t forget this you Jew bastard.”

Because he was outspoken, Margolis was a prime target for U.S. authorities who wanted to prove that foreigners were bent on overthrowing the American government. He was dragged into the national spotlight when he testified before a Senate committee investigation on the causes of the 1919 nationwide steel strike. Pittsburgh quickly became the storm center for the labor dispute, triggering a crackdown on civil liberties by the police.

The American Federation of Labor began a grassroots effort to organize workers in the metal trades within the steel industry into one union under the AFL banner. Organizers infiltrated the steel towns and coal patches throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. The organizing effort was spearheaded by William Z. Foster, which industrialists claimed as proof that the strike was ordered by Bolsheviks in Moscow. The senators questioned Margolis about his role in organizing the strike even though he denied having anything to do with the planning. He never spoke at any union meetings and differed with Foster’s strategy. When he testified, Foster came to Margolis’ defense claiming the senators “dragged in Mr. Margolis and made him a scapegoat” because of his reputation as a radical lawyer.

Foster explained that, “The Senate Committee selected [Margolis] as the man who had organized, with my hearty support and cooperation, the real force behind the strike, the I.W.W.’s, Anarchists and Bolsheviks.”

To further prove their contentions, the senators pressed Margolis about his relationship to Goldman and Berkman, whom he admitted were his friends. Goldman referred to Margolis as “my good old comrade” in her book, Living My Life. “Are you in accord with them?” Sen. William Kenyon of Iowa asked Margolis. “Yes sir,” was his response. Since he admitted he was a Bolshevik, the committee accused Margolis of being “behind
the strike with all his power. We call attention also in this connection to the testimony of Mr. Margolis who at least is entitled to credit for his frankness, in expounding his abominable doctrines before the committee.30

Kenyon asked Margolis how he could fulfill his oath as a lawyer to defend the U.S. Constitution while at the same time arguing for an end to government. “Senator, I have lived up to my oath to support and maintain the Constitution of the United States. I feel, as honestly and as consistently as any lawyer in Allegheny County whoever took the oath,” he replied.31 Margolis added, however, that when working conditions in the country changed, there would be no need for government. “It is a mere advocacy of a new structure which makes government unnecessary.”32 He continued, “I believe that human society can get along without government, and that if certain conditions prevailed that the people of this country, or for that matter, any other country, can do away with the causes of government and then they would not have to have any government.”33

Margolis also told the senators he did not believe in violence. “I do not believe in war under any circumstances,” he testified. “I do not believe in using force against force, and if it comes to such a pass, I do not believe in killing.” “And, if a man came in and assaulted your wife, would you try to persuade him not to?” asked a senator. “I would try to persuade him not to,” Margolis answered. “If I could not persuade him, I would not use violence; I would do nothing.”34

Fellow lawyers in Pittsburgh were unnerved by Margolis’ testimony and feared if they represented clients the government viewed as radical, they might invite the same scrutiny as Margolis.35 After Margolis returned to Pittsburgh, the county bar association formed the Allegheny County Lawyers League of Patriotism, complaining that some of its members were not at patriotic as they should be.36 The Allegheny County Bar Association began investigating Margolis after he returned from Washington, but he refused to repudiate his ties to Goldman and Berkman. Even though they had been guests in his home, Margolis disagreed with them over the use of violence. “Change in government should be accomplished without resorting to disorder, bloodshed or human slaughter,” he said.37 Margolis did not fear the prospect of disbarment:

> I have no fear of the result of any investigation instigated by the bar association because I have said nothing against the United States government which I have sworn to uphold. My evidence at Washington was to the effect that if certain social and economic conditions were adopted, there would be no need for government, and when I believe that these considerations can be brought about, I have a right to say that I am against all government whom I know to be unnecessary. And mark you, those conditions will come, perhaps not as soon as in Europe, but they will come. It does not take religion to make men
The education of all classes, along the lines of social and economic living will do that very thing, and then there will be no need of government, no law, no agreement or anything of that kind.  

The bar association filed a petition in the Allegheny County courts seeking his ouster, and the Margolis disbarment hearing began April 29, 1920. The bar association was not able to justify Margolis’ disbarment on his political or religious grounds, so they accused him of failing to adhere to his oath as a lawyer and cited his active role in opposing draft laws, finding that “the record before us discloses not only a lack of respect for the duly enacted laws of the land but the active encouragement of others to violate them.”

The bar association had to dig deep to find a precedent. It cited an 1809 case of an attorney accused of leading a movement that slaughtered whites during a slave revolt in Santo Domingo. Another case cited was that of a lawyer in Florida disbarred after participating in a lynching. One witness against Margolis testified he heard Margolis say before World War I that if Germany invaded the United States, he would serve under Kaiser Wilhelm. Margolis never challenged the claim. Another witness testified that Margolis had argued the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 by a German submarine and the loss of 1,195 lives was justified. Margolis wrote in Alexander Berkman’s The Blast that, while Pittsburgh thrived by making munitions for the war, little thought was given to dead soldiers who were “the flowers of manhood from France, Germany, England and Russia…. What of it? We have work—intoxicating work. Everybody is too busy working and reaping the whirlwind of prosperity to think of anything else.”

As evidence to buttress their case, bar association attorneys portrayed Margolis’ law office as a meeting place where conspiracies were hatched. Government agents found copies of speeches by Goldman and Berkman there along with buttons depicting Leon Trotsky and the Communist flag. His attorneys unsuccessfully tried to bar the introduction of that evidence and argued the bar association had no authority to bring charges against him. Attorney George Bradshaw, who represented Margolis, said of the proceedings,

We have an absolute and indefensible right to think as we please on matters political or religious as long as they obey the law…. This entire proceeding is based on mob action. This is the vilest proceeding ever brought into this court. This petition does not charge any crime known to the law against public or private morals.

Final arguments were held May 13. The three-judge panel ruled in September that Margolis’ actions constituted a violation of the legal Canons of Ethics. The recommendation to disbar Margolis was accepted by Judge Ambrose B. Reid who ruled, “The rule must be absolute, and it is ordained that the name of the respondent, Jacob Margolis, be stricken forever from the rolls of attorneys of this court.” Margolis appealed his ousting to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, but the justices rejected his arguments. They wrote that because Margolis taught “iniquitous doctrines to persons predisposed to lawlessness, point unerringly to the conclusion that his purpose therein was treasonable and his object was the destruction of the existing government by force.”

After his banishment from the legal profession, the government continued its surveillance of Margolis. Agents were ordered to conduct “a very discreet and confidential investigation” of Margolis and to obtain a copy of the disbarment proceedings. Margolis applied for reinstatement several times, but was rejected. He sold insurance before leaving Pittsburgh and shuffling between Milwaukee and Detroit, where he became editor of a Jewish newspaper.

Finally, in 1928, the Allegheny County Bar Association recommended that Margolis be allowed to practice again. After years in legal no-man’s land, Margolis was no longer viewed as a threat to public order. His fiery oratory softened and his fellow attorneys, who had once shunned him, no longer stood in his way of resuming his law practice.

After reopening his law office, Margolis kept speaking and defending people accused of being radicals. He represented members of the Communist-led National Miners Union and he defended three pacifist students expelled from the University of Pittsburgh for exercising their First Amendment rights.
In 1929, he defended an Italian miner accused of killing a state trooper in Cheswick during a rally protesting the convictions of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti; his client was found not guilty.51

Before he was disbarred, Margolis arranged lecture tours for Emma Goldman when she came to Pittsburgh to speak about birth control, free love, and an end to government. Margolis had a difficult time finding a venue willing to rent him space once they learned Goldman was to be the speaker; 22 theaters and hotels turned him down.52 Goldman had been a frequent visitor to Pittsburgh and often stayed in the Hill District, however authorities in Pittsburgh ordered her to be arrested on sight.53 After President William McKinley was assassinated, his killer, Leon Czolgosz, said he was inspired by Goldman’s writings on anarchism. When the train carrying McKinley’s body traveled through Pittsburgh, mobs hanged Goldman in effigy.54

After he was reinstated, Margolis resumed his correspondence with Goldman, who had been deported to Russia in 1919 but was allowed to return from exile in 1933. In 1934, she again asked Margolis for his help in resuming her speaking tour, which he had difficulty booking.55 The Pittsburgh Board of Education refused to allow her to speak at Schenley High School.56 The Schenley Hotel also rejected a request from Margolis for the rental of its ballroom.57 Eventually, city officials granted her a permit to speak at Carnegie Hall on the North Side.58

After resuming the practice of law, Margolis realized he had become a footnote in the history of Pittsburgh’s radical movement. His dream of a stateless society began to fade and as he continued to lecture, fewer people came to hear him speak. The government reported that “Margolis persists in being an Anarchist when he is a well-educated person and should know that change cannot be achieved by peaceful means.”59

In 1940, he closed his...
office in the Grant Building and moved to Santa Barbara, California, still unwavering in his belief that government was unnecessary. During his senate testimony, a senator remarked that Margolis seemed to have “no sympathy for American institutions,” which Margolis didn’t deny.

“I vociferously damned their whole idiotic social order,” he said, ever the radical.60

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Note: The photo of Jacob Margolis comes to us from Ron Schuler, who is completing a comprehensive history of the legal profession in Pittsburgh and its impact on American history titled The Steel Bar, which features Jacob Margolis as one of its protagonists.

9 In re: Margolis, 314.
10 “Socialists and Others in Police Court,” Gazette Times, Pittsburgh, Aug. 12, 1912. The following month, an Allegheny County judge overturned a city ordinance that prevented the Socialist Party from holding the Homewood rally. “Court Ruling Is Victory For Socialists,” Gazette Times, Pittsburgh, Sept. 20, 1912.

Referred to as a “silent agitator,” this image was printed on stickers that were distributed to raise awareness and suspicion of the union.

Ref. IWW Archives.

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Find out more about Ron Schuler’s upcoming book The Steel Bar: Pittsburgh Lawyers and the Making of Modern America.
Margolis Did Not Fear the Prospect of Disbarment:

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11 In re: Margolis, 318.  
15 Pittsburgh Thinks Plots Began Here,” The Pittsburgh Press, June 15, 1919.  
17 In re: National Civil Liberties Bureau, Bureau of Investigation Case Files, 1908-1922, 18789, M1805, Roll 934, 230, NARA.  
18 Protest High Rent In Hill District,” The Pittsburgh Press, Feb. 28, 1921.  
20 “Anarchists And Their Active Work in Pittsburgh,” The Pittsburgh Press, Sept. 15, 1901. The Hill District also produced notables in politics and in the art world. Future Pittsburgh Mayor and Pennsylvania Governor David Lawrence were born in the Hill along with actor Adolph Menjou and jazz artists Bill Eckstine, Earl Hines, and Oscar Levant. Composer Bill Strayhorn and singers Lena Horne and Hazel Scott also lived for a time in the Hill. Goldman, “Hill District As I Knew It.”  
22 McCormick, 31.  
23 Ibid., 38.  
25 “Last Warning,” U.S. Department of Justice, Old German Files, Record Group 65, 18197, NARA.  
27 Ibid.  
29 Ibid., 837  
31 Ibid.  
32 Investigation of Strike in Steel Industry, 838.  
33 Ibid.  
34 Ibid., 820.  
40 In re: Margolis, Pittsburgh Legal Journal, Allegheny County Bar Association, 68 (Jan. 1, 1920-Dec. 31, 1920): 610. Pierre Dormenon was accused of leading “an army of 1,500 assassins” during 1793 when he smashed a plot by anarchists to kill federal and state officials as part of the May Day demonstrations. The charge leading to his disbarment was because he “headed and aided the negroes of St. Domingo in their horrible massacre and other outrages against whites in and about the year 1793.” Jacob D. Wheeler, Reports of Criminal Cases with Notes and References, Vol. 2 (New York: Gould, Banks & Gould, 1851), 344. A further hearing found there was no evidence to substantiate the charges and Dormenon was later reinstated. Peter J. Kastor, The Nation’s Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America (New Haven: Yale University Press), 199.  
41 Attorney J.B. Wall was disbarred because he was part of a mob in 1883 that removed a prisoner from a county jail in Florida and then lynched the man from a tree in front of the courthouse steps. Ex parte Wall, 107, U.S. 265 (1883), 107.  
46 Ibid. The same day the Margolis decision was handed down, federal authorities announced they had smashed a plot by anarchists to kill federal and state officials as part of the May Day demonstrations. Both stories appeared on the front page of The Gazette Times as if to link Margolis to the plots. “Red Plots for Assassination Bared,” The Gazette Times, Pittsburgh, April 30, 1920.  
47 Pennsylvania State Reports, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, 1921, October term, 207-08.  
48 McCormick, 199.  
49 “Jacob Margolis Insurance,” U.S. Bureau of Investigation Case Files, July 18, 1921, OG, 600, 754-12. “Margolis Was Editor of Detroit Jewish Chronicle,” June 30, 1927, jta.org  
52 “Goldman Won’t Stop Here,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Aug. 13, 1934. Goldman was hanged in effigy after the assassination of President McKinley when the train carrying McKinley’s body passed through the city. “Beaten, Burned And Hanged,” The Pittsburgh Press, Sept. 19, 1901. Goldman was charged with complicity in the president’s death after assassin Leon Czołoz was said he inspired to kill McKinley by Goldman’s writings. The charge against Goldman later was dismissed. Margolis once sponsored an appearance by Big Bill Haywood at a Socialist rally at Kennywood Park that was attended by 15,000.  
55 McCormick, 200.  
59 McCormick, 199.  
60 Ibid., 200.