

My Birmingham by Sonja Franeta

I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area. I had just divorced my husband (of six years) after coming out as a lesbian in 1977. My first girlfriend and I split up after a couple of years but I continued to explore lesbian life in San Francisco, which was vibrant and fun during these years of the women's movement.

Soon after coming out I became a political activist and began working in non-traditional jobs for women. I became a machinist, learning the trade on the job from other machinists. I had joined the Socialist Workers Party which aimed to get most of its members into the trade unions as a way to influence working class politics and talk to co-workers about the ineffectiveness of the capitalist two-party system. Also, I was an activist in San Francisco NOW as well as in groups that called for a stop to U.S. intervention in Latin America.

In 1980, I moved to Birmingham Alabama, after being inspired by Socialist Workers Party leaders urging members to get jobs in the coal mines and do union work in basic industry. The United Mine Workers would be the next big workers struggle on the horizon. San Francisco was hardly the center of industrial America but it was a place of strong activism among students and LatinX and many other groups; it also had a strong pro-union tradition.

My sister Gina had just died in a car crash in the Bronx. She was only 18. It was a terrible tragedy and such a loss to me and my family in New York. When word got to my SWP friends living in Birmingham that I was interested in the mines, they urged me lovingly and enthusiastically to move there and work with them in the branch. So I went. I wanted to plunge into the rally to work in the UMW and in the much maligned South. I wanted to move on from my grief too, not to leave my sister behind but to do something heroic in her honor. I know this sounds a little full of myself but that's what I was thinking.

I moved to an apartment in beautiful tree-lined Birmingham, down the street from the great statue of Vulcan, Birmingham's iron-man symbol. The city was famous for the availability of iron ore, coal and limestone within a ten-mile radius. I shared the apartment in a large old house with another woman comrade. A second apartment was partitioned off and some young siblings who were African American lived there. The Southside was a mixed community, younger and hipper than the rest of Birmingham.

One thing I noticed as first I walked around the city was that people said hello. I was surprised, at first thinking people knew me from somewhere but then I started doing it too. I really liked that. I'd never lived in the South. I visited there because my ex-husband was a Southerner from Georgia. I was looking forward to getting to know Birmingham and the area from a political viewpoint.

The priority was doing party work and getting into the mines. We organized the branch from our socialist bookstore. We joined whatever activist work was going on there, which was mostly civil rights work. As for getting a mining job, one couldn't just go up to a mine and apply for a job. Attending a mining training school in Walker County about an hour north of the city and hope that the certificate would hopefully get us in. Six of us went to the school. The party had an organized jobs committee that helped comrades with the details of job hunting and served as a support group. We never did things alone.

After doing this training for six months, which included getting a CPR certificate and visiting a mine, no jobs were available. I ended up using my machine shop skills that I had learned in the San Francisco Bay Area to get a journeyman machinist job in a military aircraft repair facility near the Birmingham Airport. Hayes International was the largest employer in Birmingham at the time. I met some wonderful people there and during that time, I ran for mayor of Birmingham. More about that later.

Moving to Birmingham was like moving to another country. Although we in the party talked about the pervasiveness of racism throughout the country, the Jim Crow laws and their legacy were very blatant in Birmingham and in the South. For that reason it seemed like another country. But just a year earlier I was on a Klan watch in the SF Bay Area, when there was a rash of cross burnings on people's lawns for moving into a white neighborhood. Still this was different.

As a lesbian, of course I wanted to explore the lesbian bars. There were only a few but when I went there I didn't see any lesbians of color. I wondered where they got together. When I worked at Hayes International, I became friends with Liza Ray who worked in another area and was black. She was curious about my politics. My comrades and I were becoming known as defenders of civil rights and other issues at Hayes. To put oneself out as a friend of black people was a very big step even in the 1980s. Liza Ray admired me for that and eventually came out to me. She told me there were separate places that black lesbians gathered. They knew each other mostly through others. It was a kind of network. She was not out to her family, she said, so it was hard. There were always questions about getting married.

Liza Ray and I sometimes had lunch together outside one of the hangars. She would tell me stories about life in Birmingham for black people. "See that hill over there," I remember her pointing straight ahead. "That's the white cemetery." And then she'd point to the right to a flat area, "And that's the black cemetery." We dated a few times but she was an alcoholic and it turned our relationship sour. I knew from Liza Ray said being queer was another stigma besides being black, but somehow they survived. The pressures were great. I was asked by a young black lesbian I met at some event to take her to a white lesbian dance. Going as my date was the only way she could get in, so I took her and she got in. She had a great time and danced the whole night, so did I.

A year or so after moving to Birmingham, I stopped at a garage/porch sale on Southside. It was one of those beautiful two-story old houses with a big front porch and a great residential corner location. The man was a professor who was about to move to North Carolina for a position. He loved the house and didn't want to sell it.

"I am thinking of renting it out," he said. I told him I might be interested. He showed me the house and I fell in love with it. Wood panelling on the first floor with a secret door to a small mysterious room, and the second floor with four large bedrooms. To this day I think of it as the most beautiful house I've lived in. He rented it to me for \$350 a month. I got three comrades to move in with me and it was really fantastic.

I made some wonderful friends and had relationships, people who are in my life to this day. I met one of my closest writer friends in Birmingham at that time. I was a matchmaker for two of my dearest friends. I had a relationship with a woman who supported my politics and even traveled to with me to visit the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

We had some wonderful parties and socials at that Southside house. One time we had a party, playing music and dancing in the big living room with wood floors and a big staircase in the background. There was a mixture of comrades and lesbian friends. Suddenly a police car was noticed and then we heard a woman in the neighborhood shouting: "They're race-mixing in there!" Such an accusation, I had never heard. The cops came to the door and when I answered, they simply asked us to turn down the music.

The house served another very important purpose in Birmingham. With some lesbian friends we started a regular meeting called "Second Sunday." It was a Sunday afternoon potluck to introduce lesbian visitors to Birmingham. We ate and talked and met and befriended many people this way. By that time my roommates were two other lesbians I had met locally. With several of the more musically oriented women who came to Second Sundays, a group called Magnolia Productions was started and they ended up organizing women's music concerts. A band called Marathon grew out of all these connections as well. I became a groupie of my friends' lesbian band and would often accompany them to concerts. I still have friends in Birmingham, even though I was only there five years in the 1980s.

It was amazing that I managed to do all this, because my party work took up so much of my life. I was a dedicated socialist and went to many events with our bookstore and newspaper called *The Militant*. We also had our own weekly meetings, committee meetings and national and local political campaigns through which we explained our program: that capitalism had to end and that what we needed was a society based on socialist principles of workers' control of production, equal opportunities for all, an end to imperialist interference and war in other countries. At this time we also proposed the idea of a labor party, because both parties in the U.S. two-party system represented the rich and there was no representation for the working class or poor.

To that effect, because I was established in my job in a large and significant working class site, I was asked by the branch party leaders to run as the Socialist Workers Party candidate for Mayor of Birmingham. I would get lots of support from members and others—it was not like I thought of running on my own. The party got the signatures required to run on the ballot and I ran against a Republican and a Democrat, the first black mayor of Birmingham—Richard Arrington. It would only be his second term running. The Party did not run me against him specifically. We aimed to explain our program and to point out that the Democrats were also run by money and didn't represent the working people. We did not try to win votes or the election. In one newspaper article I was quoted as saying I would drop my candidacy and back Arrington if he left the Democratic Party and had some concrete plans to help the working people of Birmingham.

On the job I was able to be more public about my politics. My immediate supporters (those in the party who worked there) were shocked to find nooses on their machines one morning. They also got anti-socialist drawings placed in their work areas. I had a clay penis with steel shavings for hairs placed in my toolbox, which I just picked up and threw in the garbage.

There were coworkers who openly supported us. One white co-worker said we had a right to our politics no matter what these people did or what anyone else thought. When we reported it, it was stopped. I had white women and black women stop to see me in the machine shop and tell me they were glad I was running because I was a woman. I used these opportunities to talk about women's rights or some other aspect of our politics. I also engaged in a few public debates with the candidates on TV and at the university, which made our ideas a little more known. All in all it was a really good experience.

On this and other campaigns we would go door to door in the black and working class neighborhoods and talk to people. I loved this most. Sometimes we would be invited inside. I was always happy to go around and meet people where they lived. I also went to many marches for civil rights and felt privileged to learn about people's lives and struggles and the incredible history of the civil rights struggle, while I was in Birmingham.