

**The Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research:
An Independent Home for the Left**

Term paper written for Professor Maack's class on Historical Research Methodology

Introduction/Scope of the Presentation

The Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research (SCL) is a library and archive situated in South Central Los Angeles. The SCL has regular presentations of speakers or films on topics relating to the community organizing efforts of Los Angeles activists. The SCL was initially the work of Emil Freed, the son of anarchists and brought up with the consciousness that the world needed to be changed. His political life led him to John Reed Clubs in 1929, which were associated with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA); he eventually became a member of the CPUSA, with which he was associated until his dying days.

The library has a diverse collection today. It is in possession of most of the of the run of The California Eagle, one of the West Coast's oldest African-American newspapers; the papers of labor unions; materials of the Jewish Left in Los Angeles; and materials on the Southern California branch of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Quite interesting is that later board members joined the New American Movement (NAM), an organization that attracted those who had left the CPUSA- papers relating to their involvement with that group are included in those later board members' personal papers. The reality is that historical collections on Chican@s and Latin@s are less well represented, and still less on Asian-Americans. There are some LGBT materials, but this can be improved as well. There are manuscripts, organizational documents, audio-recordings of political events (a number of which Freed recorded himself), oral histories, and an array of political pamphlets housed at the archive.

This paper will explore the origins of this unique institution, a non-profit library and archive that not only houses materials on the history of the Left, but actively works to support current activist work in addition to scholarly research on Left history. Emil Freed was the founder of the SCL, and his contributions of time and energy are considered by past board members and associates to be the reason for the library beginning and surviving its early years. As a singular figure who dedicated his later years to the library, it is impossible to tell the story of the SCL without discussing the political life of Emil Freed as well. Thus, Freed's political life is discussed, which then leads us up to the last twenty years of his life he gave to developing the Southern California Library. Emil died at the end of 1982, and my research essentially ends there, though I have attempted to extrapolate and make conclusions relating the history of the SCL to its current work.

My research into the SCL was guided by my interest in the current work of the library today, and discussions with friends there about its evolution. I have volunteered at the institution, and as a student of Library and Information Studies that is also involved in political work, being involved with the library has been a way to bridge those two interests.

Understanding what prompted the creation of the library is a primary question for this project. The library has always been a political space, and understanding the politics of Freed was also critical to my research. I figured that looking at the earliest collection of the library and archives, and delving into who the library served in its early years would be key points. I was also interested in how the library survived, since even today the SCL is constantly seeking funds. Through my research I also became interested in

who served on the board, though this will not be discussed at great length, due to the length of one academic quarter, and the unfortunate fact that the papers I used for research were not all well organized.

The materials I searched through in this project are the papers of Emil and Tassia Freed, Board of Directors Meeting Notes, Correspondence with the SCL (mostly with Emil), and the paper of John Marx Ayres. I listened to interviews done with Freed that are held at the SCL. I also interviewed three former board members August Maymudes , J. Marx Ayres, and John Laslett; and had more informal discussions with former archivist for the SCL, Sarah Cooper, and former board members, Donna Wilkinson and Gary Philips.

A quick note on my informal reference to Emil, instead of his last name, Freed: In all discussions with former board members and staff, everyone refers to the man as Emil. Such an attitude also speaks to the informal nature of the institution today, despite the serious commitment of staff and the board to politics and the historical materials held there.

Emil Freed's Life and Political Development

As the founder of the Southern California Library, it has been important to explore Emil Freed's life. His papers and interviews with associates show a man singularly committed to politics and involvement with the Communist Party, USA (CP). With the founding of the SCL, he focused that energy into preserving the record of the Left.

Emil Freed was born June 25, 1901, with the name Emanuel Rosenberg, in New York City. His mother Rose, originally from the Brest-Litovsk area of Russia, remarried in 1909 to Morris Freed. Emil's name was changed upon the family's relocation to Los Angeles in 1910.¹ Emil says that his grandparents were quite religious Jews, but that his mother ran in anarchist circles, which is how she met her second husband.² There is no mention of specific organizations that Rose participated in, though there was certainly a large and culturally vibrant immigrant Jewish left, religious and secular, in New York at that time, with various expressions of radicalism. Emil doesn't speak specifically on how his family's politics affected his future political commitments, though he clearly developed anticapitalist politics that he held to the end of his days.

Emil attended Manual Arts High School, about twenty four blocks north of where the SCL is currently housed, graduating in 1917.³ He then attended the University of Southern California, graduating in 1923 with a degree in Electrical Engineering.⁴ His undergraduate work would be the basis for his paid employment in the future, but that work would not be what drove him in life. His papers do include a resume of his engineering work, but that is about it. Papers relating to political involvement are what he kept. Clearly not all politically active people are like this, but Emil was. Marx Ayres (Marx is his middle name but everyone calls him Marx) says that while he was a Party member, and the Party was an important part of his life, he had a professional life as well

¹ Statement by Rose Freed to Notary Public. January 23, 1942. Emil and Tassia Freed papers. MSS 007, Box 1, Folder 14, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

² Emil Freed interview on early life. Emil Freed tapes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

³ High School Diploma, June 27, 1917. Emil and Tassia Freed papers, MSS 007, Box 1, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

⁴ Undergraduate Diploma, June 23, 1923, Emil and Tassia Freed papers, MSS 007, Box 1, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

in which he was quite accomplished; Emil saw his accomplishments as not coming from his professional life, but from his Party activities.⁵

Three years after graduating college, he married his wife Tassia in 1926.⁶ It is not clear how they met, but it seems that they participated together in activities. In an interview from March 3, 1982, Emil mentions his involvement in John Reed Clubs, which were part of the CP, starting in 1929.⁷ A 1932 playbill then shows them acting together in a production called “Dirt Farmers”.⁸

Emil’s involvement with the Communist Party in those years is likely significant for why he stayed involved for so long. With the depression of the 1930’s, the CP made gains in numbers and forced the federal government to recognize the rights of poor people (See Isserman: *Whose Side Were You On?* [1982] and Ottannelli: *The Communist Party of the United States* [1991]). To feel like one had made important gains in the political arena could be a significant reason for loyalty to the Party. The importance of the Party to community is also shown by August Maymudes and Marx Ayres: both men were “red-diaper babies”, born into the culture of the CP, and stayed in the Party for years to come (though both did eventually leave).⁹ While Emil hadn’t been born into the Party (and he couldn’t have since it started in 1919), he certainly knew that his mother

⁵ Interview with J. Marx Ayres. 3/3/07. Marx’s family history is interesting in its own right. Marx’s father was a priest whose belief in social justice led him to Marxism, which he came to right around the time of Marx’s birth, thus his middle name.

⁶ Marriage certificate, December 24, 1926. Emil and Tassia Freed papers, MSS 007, Box 1, Folder 2, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

⁷ Emil Freed interview with Sloat. March, 3 1982. Emil Freed tapes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

⁸ Emil and Tassia Freed papers, MSS 007, Box 1, Folder 7, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

⁹ Interview with August Maymudes, 2/27/07. Interview with J Marx Ayres 3/3/07.

considered herself to have revolutionary politics, and this must have affected his political development growing up.

Emil's involvement with the Party seems to have grown through the 1930's and 40's. In 1938 and 1940 he ran for office in California congressional district. Through 1944 and 1945 he also wrote regular monthly columns for a CP newsletter called Fair Facts.¹⁰ In 1942 he volunteered to fight in the armed services, in the spirit of anti-fascism and the Popular Front. He was denied based on age criteria; the government seems to have had a cut off date of thirty-eight years old and he was over forty at that time.¹¹

In 1949, Emil spent a year in jail. In the late 1940's there were a number of strikes in Hollywood against management (see Horne: *Class Struggle in Hollywood* [2001]). While Emil did not work in Hollywood, he was selling CP newspapers across the street from a strike, and was arrested! In Emil's papers of 8 boxes, around three of them are dedicated to letters he received in jail. Clearly this was an important event in his life, and perhaps shows his feelings towards the Party and having sacrificed gladly for it. In the set of pictures associated with the collection, there is a picture of Emil in jail (after being released?).¹² looking quite dutiful. Another event that might have steeled Emil against the 'system' and to take refuge in the Party is that Tassia was called before HUAC in 1955.¹³ Both members of his family were being hounded, simply for affiliation with Communism.

¹⁰ See documents in box labeled "Emil Freed Papers, 1940's (important)". Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

¹¹ Emil and Tassia Freed papers, MSS 007, Box 13, Folder 7, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

¹² Emil and Tassia Freed papers, MSS 007, Box 8 (oversize materials), Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

¹³ Emil and Tassia Freed papers, MSS 007, Box 13, Folder 5, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

Despite many people being scared of CP involvement in this period, Emil continued on; he was committed and would not be deterred. That he stayed on even after the crimes of Stalin were announced, when droves left the Party, shows his allegiance to a certain grouping of individuals and certain kind of politics. It need not mean he was completely uncritical of Party politics; Dorothy Healey, a key figure in Southern California CP history remained in the Party until 1971, leaving after her internal criticisms kept falling on deaf ears (see Healey: *California Red* [1993]). August Maymudes says that Emil had disagreements with Healey¹⁴, but it is not clear what they agreed upon. Unfortunately, it is not possible to register Emil's thoughts on CP history based solely on the example of Healey. Emil did not make the Southern California Library an organ of the Communist Party, and this does show he felt some necessity to have independence from the CP.

Emil's Involvement with Pedagogy Before the Southern California Library

In 1944, Emil was invited to work with the People Educational Association to work on the Committee of Affiliations. Documentation doesn't show how necessarily involved he was, but if his fervor with other projects is any indication, it is possible he took on the role with gusto. Later, it is possible he worked with the California Labor School, the Southern California Branch beginning work in 1948 as an outgrowth of the Northern California Bay Area project.¹⁵ Both of these projects had CP involvement and had the aim of educating community members around issue like labor history and the history of socialism. There were also cultural aspects to these institutions like singing and dance

¹⁴ Interview with August Maymudes, 2/27/07.

¹⁵ See documents in box labeled "Emil Freed Papers, 1940's (important)". Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

classes. According to Emil, the California Labor School closed in 1952, due to the pressures of McCarthyism; folks just stopped showing up to the school for fear of the consequences of being labeled a communist.¹⁶ Close to ten years later, Emil would approach the CP to take control of the California Labor School's library, which he says had been neglected for all of that time, in order to create a new institution. This time the space would be a library, not a school, but Emil still saw the importance of keeping the history of politics alive.

Library Beginnings

Emil says that the history of the library begins in 1929, with his seeming entry into the world of the CP.¹⁷ Even if it is perfect hindsight, he states that he read political materials with veracity, and somewhere in the back of his head he knew he was reading materials that would be important to history. He saved numerous pamphlets and newspapers.

During the McCarthy era, a number of Emil's friends and associates no longer wanted to hang onto the Leftist materials they had in their possession. It seems that people in this period would even bury or burn materials to not be associated with them. Emil took on the task of taking many people's literature, and filled his own garage and at least four others.¹⁸

¹⁶ Emil Freed interview with Sloat. March, 3 1982. Emil Freed tapes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Board notes 1967. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research. "Freed indicating there are five garages for holding surplus materials to be sorted for library use and surplus sales"

Around 1962 or 1963, Emil approached the Communist Party about taking care of the neglected California Labor School library. He was told he could take control of it, and he managed to get \$50 a month from the Party to rent a space for the materials. The arrangement lasted for a while, perhaps a couple of years during which time the library also shared a building with the Communist Party's bookstore. Despite this initial proximity of the Party and Emil's library project, he states that he envisioned a library that was independent of universities and political parties.¹⁹

Emil doesn't say much about his motivations. Nonetheless, he dedicated a great amount of time from 1963 to 1982, starting an institution that would outlive him and retain his ideal that it remain independent. Such motivations for non-alliance with more 'traditional' libraries has not necessarily even been obvious to the Board of Directors that he sought to support his project. As early as the first official board meeting, point 15 on the agenda was to discuss whether the library was necessary or the materials should be given to a university.²⁰ Presumably, Emil would have made the agenda for this meeting, and perhaps recognized a hesitance to take the project forward; was the question a straw man for Emil to make his case in the clearest terms possible? At any rate, it seems that the issue of giving the collection to a more established institution would not be raised again, at least officially, until after Emil's death.

The new Board was made up of prominent professionals, the most famous being Robert Kenny, a non-communist lawyer who was still an ally to the CP and other progressive causes. Kenny is mentioned by Emil and Dorothy Healey as being quite

¹⁹ Emil Freed interview with Sloat. March, 3 1982. Emil Freed tapes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

²⁰ Board of Directors minutes. 2/26/1967. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

open in his friendship with communists, despite his more liberal leanings.²¹ Former archivist to the SCL, Sarah Cooper, was quite helpful in putting the non-communist Board of Directors in context: Communists had to look for allies, and they also sought to make themselves 'presentable' to more left-leaning Democrats. There are papers at the SCL on the California Democratic Councils (CDCs), community projects of Democratic Party members. Emil made recordings of statewide meetings and other CP members seem to have participated in the CDCs. Interestingly, the Board did not have a grass-roots community organizer at the onset. Perhaps Emil felt he played this role.

Library Development

There is a good deal of correspondence that the SCL has saved, much of it to and from Emil, much of it requests for information to the library or to get material for the library. Emil had a grand project worked out in his mind for the SCL. While the library today focuses on the name Southern California and tries to be more geographically precise in their collections, Emil requested materials from all the United States, and from Cuba, China, and Ireland, to name a few places.²² And Emil did this despite the fact that the collections from the California Labor School and the garages were not organized! Emil certainly had vision about what the collection should be, a testament to the multiplicity of social struggles going on in the *world*. Emil came from a political tradition that definitely had reverence for world events, like the Russian Revolution, or the Spanish Civil War. To Emil and his comrades, politics couldn't be understood as

²¹ Emil Freed interview with Sloat. March, 3 1982. Emil Freed tapes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research. Healey, Dorothy. *California Red*, p108.

²² Communications folders. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

geographically isolated phenomena. Whether he should have been collecting as he did is a matter of pragmatics, and the library has changed its strategy at this point, preferring to show expertise on Los Angeles. The Articles of Incorporation that were formed for when the library became a non-profit institution also show another aspect of Emil's intent: "B. To house and make available literature representing the full political spectrum from the extreme left to the extreme right..."²³ Space at the original place on 7th street would get tighter and tighter and the library moved to its current location in South Central Los Angeles in 1971.²⁴

Library Business/Survival

Being unconnected to a university or other traditional library network, the library struggled to keep its doors open, as it does to this day. The library relied on volunteer work from friends and work-study students, a resourceful trade in surplus pamphlets and books, sales of audio tapes, and more economically well-off individuals.

Emil essentially spent his retirement with the library. Current library Communications Director Michele Welsing has even said that Emil planned to live in the upstairs of the current building. He was able to get friends and interested individuals to commit time to the SCL.

Perhaps most innovative for the library was its trade in surplus materials. The communications folders are replete with notes from universities around the United States requesting the catalog that August Maymudes worked on. Emil states that the number of

²³ Articles of Information of Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

²⁴ Board of Directors minutes. 2/26/71. Authorization to purchase property. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

universities they were serving came to be around one hundred, though there is no systematic list of universities within records I have found.²⁵

Emil also seems to have been interested in creating audio recordings of political events, and these recordings also brought some income to the SCL. August Maymudes says that a recording by Emil of a Los Angeles appearance by Martin Luther King Jr. was especially sought after.²⁶ Communications folders also show that recordings of proceedings at statewide meetings of the California Democratic Councils were also popular.

Despite all this, Emil did rely on donations of funds. Marx donated the funds to buy the “Annex” of the library, part of which was to partly serve as a room for trade-unions to meet in. The move in 1971 was accomplished when \$25,000 was given to Emil.²⁷ A more formal Friends of the Library Committee was formed to bring in regular donations to the SCL.²⁸

Serving the People

When looking at the SCL it is important to see who was served by its presence. The library has certainly remained a testament to the history of the CP and other progressive causes, and this has been an important factor in Old Left loyalty to the

²⁵ Emil Freed interview with Sloat. March, 3 1982. Emil Freed tapes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

²⁶ Interview with August Maymudes, 2/27/07.

²⁷ Emil Freed interview with Sloat. March, 3 1982. Emil Freed tapes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research. Details of who the individual is that donated the funds are a bit hazy, and Sloat does not ask Freed to elaborate. Evidently, a well-to-do person was interested in Freed’s audio recordings of Angela Davis or another political figure, and through discussions with Freed learned that he could help out the library.

²⁸ Board of Directors minutes. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

library. It is not clear, however, that the library really interacted with the community as much as it would have liked to.

The importance of the library's simple existence is shown by one letter in particular. In 1972, Mary Shepardson wrote to Emil to donate materials her mother had acquired over the years. The last paragraph shows what the SCL represented: "My only regret is that we do not have such a facility in the Bay Area. Once McCarthyites closed down our California Labor School, we have had to do without this type of library."²⁹ This letter shows the connection between old projects of the Left, and how people saw Emil continuing that project of preserving their history.

While it is clear from communications that the library attracted scholars of labor history, and some students around issues of Chicano history, the community surrounding the SCL did not interact with the library. Gary Philips, a board member in the 1980s after Emil's death was a member of the Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA), an outgrowth of the Black Panther Party. Philips says that he grew up in South Central, and even during his political life with CAPA, does not recall using the library. Perhaps this is an extreme example, but it shows the greater inability of the Old Left to interact with the political movements of the late 1960's and 1970's in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, there is no documentation I have found of the efforts made to work with the community.

²⁹ Letter from Mary Shepardson, dated 9/2/1972. Communications box. Library for Social Studies and Research.

Conclusions

Emil died at the end of 1982 in December. His memorial services were held at the First Unitarian Church.³⁰ Notes on tape recordings of the event state that around five hundred people were in attendance.

Board notes from 1983 show that the issue of independence of the library was once again an issue. True to Emil's vision of the institution, it has continued to be a non-profit institution, free to be open about its wish to be an organ of social change. This may not have happened to a great extent during Emil's time, but the philosophy of the library has remained. This past year, UCLA Information Studies student Rukshana Singh held talks with community organization in Los Angeles to explicitly discuss how the library's resources can be used in their projects³¹. The SCL continues to evolve.

The focus of the library has had to change with time as well. Emil's vision of an institution looking at numerous angles of politics and worldwide scope was certainly grand, but impractical for a small non-profit institution that explicitly professes radical politics. The library has been able to survive by focusing its holdings on the more concrete limits of Los Angeles and surrounding communities. Of course, this is still a daunting task. While Emil wanted the holdings to be global in content, the SCL is still working within a city with a global population. The diversity of Los Angeles communities is still awesome, and focus of collections will continue to be an issue.

Despite the changes in the library over the last twenty-five years, it is around because Emil Freed wanted to preserve the history of radical and progressive movements

³⁰ J. Marx Ayres papers. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

³¹ These talks were taped and are held at the library. The findings of these talks have become a document guiding the current practice of the SCL. They can be contacted for this document.

that he had participated in or viewed with intense interest. The SCL stands as a testament to that history, and is an evolving project exploring how to connect information to groups that want to not only know history, but actively shape the future.

A Note on Research

Researching for this project was a fun experience, since I have worked with the Southern California Library and wanted to know its history. It was also frustrating in some ways. Twenty five years after the death of Emil, not all of his papers are organized, and in my last week of research, a box of materials presented itself, without folders or notes, but where I gained a good deal of information on Emil's political career with the Community Party. The box, labeled 'important' was certainly that, giving more intimate information than the board notes. Communications with the library are also spread throughout collections, making a systematic viewing of them difficult. Different board members have financial records scattered throughout their papers and this made deeper analysis of the SCL's finances undoable for this term project. This was fine given that my analysis rests more on the political implications of the library.

The most important book I read as a secondary source was Dorothy Healey's autobiography, *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party*. The other two books I looked at were comprehensive views of the CPUSA at different historical moments. However, the party was based in New York, and issues of policy and changes in the Party circle around the East Coast. Healey was an important figure in the Party in Southern California, and her story allowed me to be more connected to the geography here in Los Angeles.

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Timeline

Emil Freed born Emanuel Rosenberg, June 25, 1901

Emil's mother marries Morris Freed, November 12, 1909

Emil moves to Los Angeles in 1910

Graduates from Manual Arts High School, June 27, 1917

Graduates from USC, June 21, 1923, with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering

Marries Tassia on December 24, 1926

Joins Communist Party in 1929 (?), through John Reed Clubs, reads political literature voraciously

Performs in a play, "Dirt Farmers", 1932, with Tassia, as part of the John Reed Club

Runs for CA congressional representative in 1938 and 1940. On the Communist Party ticket

Volunteers for the armed forces in 1942 in the spirit of anti-fascism, but denied on age-criteria

Writes articles for Fair Facts: Fairfax Free Press, 1944-1945

Invited to work with the Peoples Educational Association on Committee of Affiliations, 1944

Works with the California Labor School (?), founded in 1948 to complement the institution in the Bay Area

Spends a year in jail in 1949

Tassia called before HUAC, 1955

Takes control of the California Labor School collection, 1962/1963

Approaches Robert Kenny about forming Southern California Library, 1963

First Board of Director's meeting 2/26/1967

Library moves to South Central, 1971

Emil becomes sick, 1981

Annex opens, May 1982

Emil dies December 4, 1982