

In black and white, a lot of red, Portlander puts the city's leftist past on the map, on the page

By Nick Budnick

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(news photo) caption: At the Bonneville Power Administration building in Northeast Portland, author Mike Munk shows off some nuggets of his research: a portrait of Woody Guthrie and a boulder etched with some of his song lyrics. L.E. Baskow / Portland Tribune

Seventy-two-year-old Mike Munk has spent years probing Portland like an obsessed private detective, rifling through documents, sniffing around street corners, shaking down witnesses for clues.

The White Eagle Saloon in North Portland? Munk knows the real scoop – the place was a haven for a suspicious-sounding Polish leftist group called “Progress.” Now, it’s a McMenamins.

That lonely bench in Washington Park? Munk can tell you who it’s named for – a radical writer who founded the U.S. Communist Party, who was the subject of the 1982 movie “Reds” and now is buried in a marked grave outside the Kremlin in Moscow.

Now, everyone can plant their posteriors on the greatest Portland monument to the man, John Reed.

Munk made headlines coast to coast last year with his ethics complaint against a Portland lawyer who registered an alleged CIA front company with his office address. But that current-affairs spotlight was just a sidelight to his real interest: the past.

Blessed with majestic white eyebrows that sprout toward the sky, Munk – who used to jokingly call himself “the Last Marxist” – is a singular figure whose influence on Portland could linger for years, albeit in a subtle, fittingly subversive way. That’s thanks to today’s release of “The Portland Red Guide: Sites & Stories of Our Radical Past.”

Devoid of political rants, the book delivers maps, photos and, above all, fascinating tales – the product of Munk’s years of digging.

Munk is “obsessive in his desire to dig out the radical past of this community,” said David Horowitz, a Portland State University history professor who has both worked and butted heads with Munk. “I’ve never seen someone so focused on their goals.”
Strikebreakers take up arms

Just imagine: A bunch of dockworkers go on strike, and the local chamber-of-commerce types don’t like it.

They hire a mob of yahoos off the street, hand them guns and, led by the mayor, run a rail car into a picket line, opening fire and wounding four men.

Hard to imagine? Well, as Munk relates in his book, it happened right here in the Rose City.

The time was 1934, and in the eyes of some, the future of the nation hung in the balance. A dockworkers' strike centered in Portland threatened to paralyze the West Coast.

The city's business leaders wanted the National Guard to clamp down on the unhappy Portland strikers, but an army intelligence officer warned them that it would spark a revolution.

In a letter unearthed by Munk, Oregon Gov. Julius Meier (of the Meier & Frank department store) warned President Franklin Roosevelt that it was an "insurrection which, if not checked, could lead to civil war."

Eventually, the Portland Chamber of Commerce set up a front group to hire vigilantes to quash the strike, leading to bloodshed on the waterfront. The strike was ended, but the incident galvanized a labor movement nationwide.

Munk sleuthed out the story using the chamber of commerce's own archives. It's how he dug up most of the stories in the book – looking in archives and personal files from around the city and state, reading new and old newspapers, and finding people who still remembered.

Horowitz, the PSU professor, said it's stories like the great 1934 dockworkers strike that most intrigued him in Munk's book. They describe a freewheeling time when, in that battle between socialism and capitalism, it was not yet decided who would be the victor.

"He's so diligent in digging out these hidden facts," Horowitz said. "It really serves a valuable purpose for people to have a sense of the history of a place."

Given his endeavors, it's not surprising that Munk has turned his home into a temple filled with leftist memorabilia, including a sketch of leftist leader Eugene Debs, a reproduction of a worker-oriented Lincoln High School mural that was censored 30 years ago and a board game called Class Struggle.

What might be more surprising is the home itself: a sprawling, 100-year-old home of rustic, rough-hewn wood that feels like a treehouse and would inspire materialistic lust in the most devout leftist.

It perches on the side of the Southwest Hills looking out over a green sea of trees that slopes toward downtown Portland. The garage door is painted red.

According to the Multnomah County assessor's office, the 2,700-square-foot home is worth \$527,000; but its real value undoubtedly is far more. So do such handsome digs spell contradiction for the Last Marxist?

"I guess if you subscribe to the notion that all socialists have a very poor lifestyle, if that is one's expectation and one's standard, then sure," Munk said. "But I honestly don't subscribe to that."

Besides, Munk said, he inherited the home from his parents – in fact, he grew up there, so in a way he's never left his past.

How many Marxists live in Council Crest?

"Hard-core? Just one," he said with a laugh. "There might be a few more soft-core ones."

College firing made a mark

Born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, his father a liberal activist, Munk and his family fled the Nazis in 1939 and moved to Portland.

It's at Reed College where, Munk jokingly says, he was "brainwashed into becoming a lefty." Specifically, his awakening happened when Stanley Moore, a popular philosophy professor, was fired for refusing to say whether he was a communist.

It was the '50s, the McCarthy era, when being a "commie" brought shame and persecution. Munk opposed the professor's termination, though his father, then a Reed political-science professor – and having moved rightward over time – supported it.

In 1959, Munk was drafted by the U.S. Army and stationed in South Korea – or, as he jokes in his biography at the end of his book, "I was ordered to leave Oregon by the federal government." He never fired a bullet, teaching night courses to officers instead.

Upon leaving the military, Munk moved to New York City and wrote for socialist newspapers and obtained a doctorate in political science from New York University. He taught college in New York, Chicago and New Jersey before returning in the mid-'90s to Portland to retire.

It was his search for an apartment upon returning that planted the seed for his book. As he checked out the Envoy apartments near Southwest 23rd Avenue and West Burnside Street, a neighbor told him John Reed had lived in the building next door.

Reed, played by Warren Beatty in the movie "Reds," was a leftist hero, a profoundly talented writer who traveled with revolutionaries around the globe, including during the 1917 Russian Revolution.

It turned out he had lived in Portland as well – though he was not, as some might suspect, the founder of Reed College.

Munk even found an essay Reed wrote about Portland, which now graces the opening page of the "Red Guide." It speaks of how "differently beautiful is this part of the world."

Fascinated, Munk began researching Portland's underground history. He regaled friends with his findings – until, he suspects, they figured out a way to shut him up.

"I was going on and on and on, and finally somebody said, 'Why don't you write this down?'"

So he did. The result is the 246-page book with maps of key leftist landmarks, ideal for walking or driving tours, broken down by era.

While Munk thinks the book will be interesting to anyone interested in Portland, regardless of political stripe, he also wants it to provide comfort to the activists of today and tomorrow.

"I hope that it will inspire them that they are following in a tradition of many generations, devoting their lives to making a better world – rather than improving their place in that world."

A slide show and book-launch party starts at 7 tonight at Liberty Hall, 311 N. Ivy St.

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