

ROBERTS, JOHN, 'Jack Russia' (1899-1979), miner, councillor and a prominent member of the Welsh Communist Party

Name: John Roberts
Pseudonym: Jack Russia
Date of birth: 1899
Date of death: 1979
Gender: Male
Occupation: miner, councillor and a prominent member of the Welsh Communist Party
Area of activity: Business and Industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration
Author: D. Ben Rees

Born 1 May 1899 in Penrhyndeudraeth, Meirionethshire, the son of John Roberts, a miner and Mary Jones, daughter of a blacksmith from Harlech. He was brought up by his grandparents in Penrhyndeudraeth and received his education in the local schools. When he left in 1913 his grandmother Sarah Jones arranged for him to travel to his parents' home in Abertridwr, where he found work at the Windsor Colliery just two months before its sister-pit, the Universal Colliery Senghenydd, exploded claiming 439 lives. He attended the local Welsh Independent Chapel where he met May Jones and on 3 April 1920 they were married at Eglwysilan Parish Church. They lost their firstborn daughter in infancy during the 1921 miners' lock-out.

Roberts was inspired in the by-election of August 1921 in the Caerphilly constituency by the Communist candidate, Robert (Bob) Stewart. Though he received only 2,592 votes compared with 13,699 for the Labour candidate, Morgan Jones, and the Liberal-Conservative candidate W. R. Edmunds with his 8,958 votes, the young miner decided on the night of the election, 24 August, to join the Communist Party. He spoke so forcefully during the 1926 General Strike about Russia's support of the workers that he became known for the rest of his life as 'Jack Russia'.

On 31 December 1932 his wife May died of pernicious anaemia leaving him to bring up their ten-year old daughter, Margaret, alone; she later became a school-teacher. This tragedy coincided with his sacking from Windsor Colliery. In February he was fined for taking coal (worth £3-2-0) and two wooden planks (worth 4 shillings) and fined ten shillings for each case. From then onwards he was constantly in trouble with the police. He took part in March 1933 in the disturbance at Bedwas between the miners who supported the South Wales Miners Industrial Union, known as the Spencer Union, and the South Wales Miners Federation. Twenty-four of the leaders were sent to Monmouthshire Assizes. Each one was imprisoned, including John Roberts, who served his six months sentence in Cardiff Prison.

He stood as a Communist candidate in the District Council elections in Abertridwr in 1932 and 1933 and he was close to success in 1934. By 1935 he used effectively his soap box from one street to another and finally gained victory over Daniel Walter Thomas, the Labour Party candidate. For the next eighteen years he served as a hard working Councillor on Caerphilly Urban District Council. By this time he was hero to the inhabitants of Abertridwr. He cycled from the village all the way to London in 1936 to show his solidarity to the Unemployment March.

On 1 January 1937 he left for Spain as a volunteer in the International Brigade. His companion was Alun Menai Williams, Penygraig, son of the Anglo-Welsh poet, **Huw Menai**. They were apprehended by French police at Perpignan and put on a train to Marseilles and then on a boat home. In May 1937 he ventured again to Spain in the company of an Abertridwr miner and fellow Communist, Leo Price. They crossed the Pyrenees into Spain and he was accepted by the British Battalion. He showed tremendous courage during the battle of Brunete (July 1937) and he was appointed Battalion Commissar in the XV Brigade on the eve of the Battle of the Aragon (August 1937). Roberts was wounded in the shoulder at Quinto, and spent time at Benicasim hospital, before being sent to the XV Brigade Officers' Training School at Tarazona de la Mancha. The whole account has been preserved by his grandson, Richard Felstead, in *No Other Way: Jack Russia and the Spanish Civil War: A Biography* (Port Talbot, 1981).

Roberts was sent home from Spain in January 1938 to contest his seat in the council elections, only to find when he reached Abertridwr that he had been returned unopposed. Roberts worked hard to gain support for Spain within the Council and through the village Spanish Aid Committee. In 1944 he was appointed manager of the Abertridwr Workmen's Hall and Institute and in 1946/7 he was the Chairman of the Caerphilly Urban District Council, and in virtue of his office he became a magistrate for the year.

Roberts was a staunch warm-hearted Welshman, a deacon in the Welsh Independent Chapel at Abertridwr. He described himself as a disciple of **Reverend T. E. Nicholas** ('Niclas y Glais'), standing in the Christian-Communist tradition. He took an active part in issuing an invitation to the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales to Caerffili in 1950. He was the Vice-Chairman of the Executive Committee and was thrilled with the Ode to the miner which won the Chair. He learnt by heart large portions of the winning ode by the Reverend Gwilym R. Tilsley. He had a high regard for ministers of his denomination, and he spoke often of the contribution of Reverend T. H. Griffiths, first full-time Secretary of the Lord's Day Fellowship in Wales, who had been his minister.

John Roberts retired in 1966 and spent the rest of his life in his chapel activities and supporting the literature and activities of the Communist Party. He failed to have another Communist Parliamentary candidate in the constituency after May 1929 when J. R. Wilson stood. He accepted the situation but never lost his allegiance to the Soviet Union Marxist or his ideology. Roberts hero-worshipped the singer **Paul Robeson**. He heard him singing in Spain in January 1938 in Tarazona de la Mancha, and heard him again at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in Ebbw Vale in 1958. His favourite film was '*Proud Valley*' in which had Robeson had starred.

Roberts married for a second time in July 1957 with Elizabeth (née Preece) and enjoyed the comforts of his home after a turbulent life. He died on 30 January 1979 at the Caerphilly Miners' Hospital and the funeral was held at Abertridwr Welsh Independent Chapel, followed by cremation at Thornhill Crematorium, Cardiff. Obituaries to him appeared in the *Morning Star*, *South Wales Echo*, *Western Mail* and *Rhymney Valley Express*.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

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Western Mail, 2 February 1979

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