

## II

# ALGER AND WHITTAKER: THE CRUCIBLE OF FAMILY

Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers were born three years, two hundred miles, and a world apart. Both came from once prosperous families which had experienced financial and emotional reverses in their parents' lifetime. Both families lived in respectable but undistinguished neighborhoods—Chambers's in the Long Island town of Lynbrook and Hiss's in Baltimore. Both boys lacked strong paternal guidance in their younger days: Hiss's father died before Alger was three and Chambers's father was separated from his wife and children for several years. A succession of suicides and other deaths in the Hiss and Chambers families afflicted the lives of both Alger and Whittaker as they grew to manhood.

The two boys responded differently to the respective disruptions in their family lives. Hiss, from the start, became an exemplary young man concerned with the approval of his peers and elders, later obtaining recognition and social standing. He achieved scholastic honors at Johns Hopkins and Harvard Law (aided by scholarships), was on the staff of the *Harvard Law Review*, and served as a clerk for Justice Holmes. At Harvard, Alger became a protégé of Professor Felix Frankfurter, who arranged the post with Holmes for the bright and deferential Hiss (whose brother, Donald, would later follow him both to Harvard Law and to a Holmes clerkship). Although the deaths of his older brother, Bosley, and his sister, Mary Ann, shook Hiss profoundly during the late 1920s, the first signs of rebellion against his Baltimore family and his own measured advance toward a conservative career in law came in 1929 while he was working for Justice Holmes. Unexpectedly, Alger married Priscilla Fansler Hobson, whose far more adventurous and socially conscious nature deeply affected Hiss's own latent sympathies for progressive causes (Hiss had been at Harvard during the campaign to save Sacco and Vanzetti from execution, a drive which Felix Frankfurter had helped lead). Hiss's mother disapproved of her son's decision to marry Priscilla, and, for reasons that remain unclear, Hiss changed earlier plans to practice law in Baltimore (he had taken the Maryland bar exam after graduating from Harvard) and, on short notice, went instead to Boston, where he worked for a leading law firm.

In 1932 Hiss followed Priscilla to New York, settling into a job at another staid and conservative law firm in Manhattan. Thirteen million

Americans were unemployed during the Depression winter of 1932-3, and the problems of the disadvantaged and dispossessed affected Alger and Priscilla deeply, all the more perhaps because of their own relatively comfortable exemption from the suffering. While Priscilla completed her book on the fine arts in America, Alger helped corporations untangle their legal problems with patents and anti-trust legislation. The couple spent their non-work hours involved in a variety of radical groups and causes. This double life continued for Hiss, defending corporations during the day while writing pro-labor articles for a radical lawyers' group at night, and for his wife until the spring of 1933, when they left for Washington after Alger accepted a post in the New Deal bureaucracy.

Both Hiss and Chambers struggled to achieve as young men. But where Alger sought approval assiduously and, for the most part, successfully, Whittaker rebelled and drifted unhappily toward an increasing alienation from family and bourgeois values. At first, Chambers avoided the realities of his unstable family through absorption in books, particularly romantic novels such as those of Victor Hugo. But as he moved into adolescence, his vicarious delight in heroic fiction gave way increasingly to a desire to write his own adventures—and perhaps to experience a few. At Columbia College he became friendly with several aspiring writers and artists, among them Lionel Trilling, Clifton Fadiman, and Meyer Schapiro, but Chambers fled college after two years to begin a vagabond's *Wanderjahr*. After traveling across the country, he returned to Columbia in 1924, but left within a few months. By his own admission, the decision he made to join the Communist Party in 1925 seemed an expression of both personal bitterness and yearning for some believable scheme of values. Following the suicide of his brother, Richard, in 1926, Chambers spent months crippled by grief, only to plunge back into CP activities, more dedicated than before to the Party's creed.

Throughout the 1920s Whittaker was involved in a series of love affairs with women and possibly in one homosexual relationship, in all cases with people who shared his radical beliefs. He served on the staff of *The Daily Worker* until 1929, when he drifted away from the CP in a controversy involving two leadership factions. He also gained a minor reputation in New York during these years as a skilled translator of German books (his translation of *Bambi* appeared in 1928) and as a poet.

He rejoined the Communist Party in 1931 after publishing several short stories in *The New Masses* that proved popular among radicals. That same year Chambers became an editor of the magazine and married a young socialist artist, a quiet and demure woman named Esther Shemitz, who tempered some of his flamboyant affectations. Chambers left *The New Masses* in late 1932, after having been recruited for the Communist underground.

The Hisses and the Chamberses lived in New York City during that worst year of Depression and despair, but did not meet until 1934. Even in

1932, however, the lives of Communist activists such as Whittaker and Esther Chambers and of liberals sympathetic to the CP had begun intersecting. For both Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers, the road to Union Square—where in 1932 Chambers edited *The New Masses* while the Hisses attended lectures at the socialist Rand School—commenced in a series of sometimes tragic family experiences that neither man had absorbed entirely.

Marriage to Esther Shemitz represented for Whittaker the start of a recommitment to the integrity of his own family, or what was left of it—wife, mother, and, shortly, children—although it would be a decade before he managed to discipline the homosexual urges that disrupted his adolescence and early manhood. Hiss's marriage had a similarly positive effect upon Alger's personality. Just as Esther imposed a measure of order upon Whittaker's unruly disposition, Priscilla Hiss brought to bear a degree of idealistic adventurousness upon her husband's rigidly disciplined and calculated ambitiousness. The mixture proved beneficial to both marriages, and it laid the groundwork for the relationship that would evolve two years later between these two dissimilar individuals, Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers.

### “Strive and Succeed”: The Early Life of Alger Hiss

“I was born on November 11, 1904, in Baltimore, Maryland,” begins the series of “autobiographical notes” Alger Hiss prepared for his attorneys in 1948. “My father died when I was about three, leaving my mother to bring up a family of five children—three boys and two girls, all of whom were older than I except my brother Donald who is two years my junior.” The facts are there—but only barely. His father, Charles Alger Hiss, killed himself by cutting his throat with a razor on April 7, 1907, at his Linden Avenue home. Charles Hiss, formerly a Baltimore dry-goods importer and jobber, was then forty-two, out of work, and burdened with the support not only of his own wife and children but also of his deceased brother's six children, whom Charles had helped financially until suffering his own reverses.<sup>1</sup>

Alger, who was two and a half at the time, knew nothing about the manner of his father's death until he was a teenager, but overnight his closely knit family became matriarchal and extended. Although Charles's more successful brother George, a cotton manufacturer in North Carolina, sent some money, the day-to-day management of the Hiss children came under the supervision of Charles's sister Eliza (Lila), who moved into the household. Other aunts, uncles, and cousins assisted over the years, with Alger Hiss's mother, Mary, known to her family and friends as “Minnie,” technically but seldom actually in charge.

Minnie Hiss was devoted to her children but also to club meetings, belonging to many of Baltimore's civic and women's groups, and sandwich-

ing in her parental obligations with the help of Aunt Lila and a cook. Hiss later described the type of household his mother ran, apparently long on domestic efficiency and spurs to achievement while somewhat bereft of warmth: "My mother's energy was fantastic. She did run the house well and checked on our clothes, manners, health, and eating habits as thoroughly as if she did naught else. . . . She was definitely a good manager. We always had a cook but Mother supervised the shopping, the choice of menus, and the preparation of meals." And one of Hiss's biographers learned about Minnie that "She urged [her children] to exhibit their virtues, talents, and knowledge, and to be nice and especially pleasant to important people. For years in advance she planned their college education."<sup>2</sup>

Whittaker Chambers later recalled Alger telling him that "his relations with his mother were affectionate but not too happy. She was, perhaps, domineering."\* Hiss's complaint over Chambers's characterization of Minnie only served to confirm it: "My relations with my mother have always been close and cordial." Hiss would later recall a happy and active "family environment," filled with the socializing of his siblings: "Friends of my older sisters and of my older brother [Bosley] were frequently in the house. Both my sisters and my older brother were musical and my older brother, in particular, was a specially gifted and charming person with great interest in literature. I have always read a great deal since my very early days and was no doubt encouraged in this way by my brother's interests and tastes."<sup>3</sup>

During the summers the Hisses vacationed at an aunt's home on Maryland's Eastern Shore—"a three-hundred-acre place with an old house built when the farm was subdivided early in the nineteenth century." While there, "Donald and I . . . lived the lives of boys on a farm, with all that that implies. At about thirteen or fourteen years of age I went to a boys' camp in Maine for two summers (where I first met Henry Collins, a fellow-camper). Right up until my marriage, however, I continued to pay regular visits to my Aunt's place and spent several summers there while at college or law school."<sup>†</sup>

Under Minnie's and Aunt Lila's ministrings, Hiss led an extremely

\* William Marbury also recalls Minnie Hiss as "a domineering type." Interview, Feb. 24, 1975.

† "Alger Hiss was the child of shabby gentility," Murray Kempton wrote, "and he and his mother made the best use of it they could. The Hisses were not a distinguished family run down. In his final tragedy, his friends and enemies would join in exaggerating the nobility of his origins. When disaster came to him, he was listed in the *Washington Social Register*, but his mother was not in its Baltimore edition. . . . They were not a family of special social prestige, but the Baltimore in which Alger Hiss grew up was still enough of a Southern city . . . [so that] in the circumstances of her life, society felt a particular sympathy for Alger Hiss's mother; among the shabby-genteel, the women tend to be stronger than the men; the average runs alarmingly toward widows with promising sons. . . . And Alger Hiss appears to have been the sort of boy who made a special impression on older people, and for the very good reason that he deserved to." *Part of Our Time* . . . (New York: Dell, 1967, paperback ed.), p. 17.

sheltered and happy childhood. He attended the Episcopal church, went to the Baltimore public schools, and, after graduating from high school and spending an additional year (1921–22) at Powder Point Academy in Duxbury, Massachusetts, entered Johns Hopkins, from which his brother Bosley previously had graduated. “As a youngster I attended Sunday School regularly,” Hiss chronicled in 1948,

and the children always accompanied Mother to church. Bill Marbury’s family sat in the pew behind us. I was a member of the Boy Scout troop. . . . At college I acted as assistant scout master for my own church’s troop. . . . In the past couple of weeks the present Rector of my old church took occasion to inform the congregation that the records of the church showed the public service which I had rendered in Sunday School and Scout work.<sup>4</sup>

The years at Johns Hopkins continued Hiss’s unbroken record of moral excellence, social approbation, and over-all achievement. Again in his description of his years at Hopkins (he was in the class of 1926)

. . . I participated rather fully in student activities, being editor of the college newspaper, president of the dramatic club, and president of the Student Council. I was also on the track squad where I was an indifferent quarter-miler. I was in the ROTC all four years and in my senior year was the cadet commander. As our family financial resources were moderate I applied for and received scholarships each year at college and [later] at law school. I was elected a member of Phi Beta Kappa and the Tudor and Stuart Club [a prestigious Hopkins society].

“Alger was almost universally admired from the beginning of his college career,” recalled William Marbury. “It was said at Johns Hopkins that ‘Alger had a mortgage on Gilman Hall [the Administration building].’” Other than his “indifferent” stint at track, Hiss left behind him a string of academic and extra-curricular successes at Hopkins. Alger’s first and only known personal failure of any consequence during these years had actually come the year before he graduated: his unsuccessful courtship of a pretty and vivacious Bryn Mawr graduate, Priscilla Fansler.<sup>5</sup>

They had met on board a ship headed for Europe in June 1924—Alger was nineteen and Priscilla a year older—and saw a great deal of each other in London at the start of their tours and in September, before returning home. During that summer Priscilla toured England while Hiss wandered through France with a friend. He later recalled having been extremely fond of Priscilla and protective toward her that summer, according to his biographer, although the interlude apparently made far less of an impression upon her.

While Hiss returned to his junior year at Hopkins that fall, Priscilla began graduate studies in literature at Yale. They corresponded, and the following Easter she visited friends in Baltimore who also knew the Hisses. At some point during this visit, according to Hiss, Priscilla told him that she was engaged to Thayer Hobson, a fellow graduate student at Yale, who

later became a New York publisher. An oft-told and well-known story among Hiss's friends concerned the time during this period that Alger and Priscilla supposedly traveled all night back and forth on the ferry between New York City and Hoboken—Hiss having journeyed up from Hopkins—while Alger tried (and failed) to persuade her not to marry Hobson. Hiss caught pneumonia soon after this, according to William Marbury, apparently from the evening chill.<sup>6</sup>

But Hiss rebounded quickly, becoming engaged to a graduate student at Hopkins for a time but breaking off the relationship during his first year at Harvard Law. After Priscilla's marriage during the summer of 1925, the Hobsons moved to New York, where she gave birth to a son, Timothy, on September 19, 1926. Shortly after that, the couple separated. For two years Priscilla worked for a new weekly newsmagazine named *Time* as "office manager," editing copy and helping to run the office staff. She left in 1928 to resume graduate work in literature and received an M.A. from Columbia in the summer of 1929.<sup>7</sup>

In later years Hiss credited his entrance into law school to the advice of a family friend, who counseled law as an avenue toward a career in diplomacy. Whatever interest in the foreign service Hiss might have brought to Harvard quickly became sidetracked, and his letters from the period discuss his ambition to practice law in large private firms—as well as other goals—while remaining silent on diplomacy. Thus he wrote his Harvard mentor, Felix Frankfurter, in 1930: "A phrase in a recent letter of yours about academicians taps a strong current in me. After four or five years of [private] practice I should like most seriously to consider teaching, assuming I were given the offer."

At Harvard, Hiss was academically and socially prominent. During his second year he won election to *Law Review* (on which he served for two years) and became a member of Lincoln's Inn, the eating club.\* A number of his colleagues on *Law Review* later became friends—Richard Field, Edward McLean, Harold Rosenwald, and Lee Pressman among them.† His years at Harvard, Hiss later felt, had broadened his attitudes toward people, albeit with an inescapable self-consciousness:

Ideologically I was at college rather a snob, socially and intellectually [he later told Meyer Zeligs]. I had already at Johns Hopkins lost the somewhat anti-Semitic snobbishness of my mother's background and outlook. I had good friends at Hopkins who were Jewish. I had many Jewish friends. I worked on the *Law Review* with a Negro student without any feeling on my part.<sup>8</sup>

Among his Jewish friends was the teacher to whom he became closest, Felix Frankfurter, who, along with Lee Pressman, helped turn Hiss's in-

\* His teachers at Harvard included not only Frankfurter but Francis B. Sayre, under whom Hiss would serve in the State Department.

† The first three worked on Hiss's defense at the time of the case.

terest toward labor law (Hiss contributed to a *Law Review* "Note" on the constitutionality of "yellow-dog contracts"). Pressman recalled for Murray Kempton those years at Harvard when the two fellow members of *Law Review* became friends:

I remember Alger Hiss best of all for a kind of distinction that had to be seen to be believed. If he were standing at the bar with the British Ambassador and you were told to give a package to the Ambassador's valet, you would give it to the Ambassador before you gave it to Alger.

He gave you a sense of absolute command and absolute grace and I think Felix felt it more than anyone. He seemed to have a kind of awe for Alger.<sup>9</sup>

Hiss became Frankfurter's protégé at the height of the professor's and his wife, Marion's, efforts to save Sacco and Vanzetti. Mrs. Frankfurter later edited the two doomed men's letters for publication, and Felix wrote a widely cited book arguing that they had been unfairly convicted and were probably innocent. Despite the enormous campaign mounted by their defenders, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in August 1927. Oddly, Hiss has never commented publicly on the impact of the case upon his own evolving social convictions.\*

Shortly after Hiss arrived at Harvard in September 1926, his older brother died, an event that deeply affected Alger. Bosley Hiss had worked as a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* while Alger studied at Hopkins. Bosley rebelled against the tight, strait-laced Victorian moral code to which Alger and the other Hisses—under Minnie's tutelage—subscribed:

. . . I have always considered that I learned even more from Bosley's mistakes in the area of emotional judgment [Hiss informed Zeligs]. He was undisciplined in habits of sleep, diet, and drink and was to my mind too casual in sexual matters. I thought I could see the injury he brought to himself or was storing up and suspected that he was hurting others. His close cronies were more glaring examples of frivolous and destructively living young men.<sup>10</sup>

In 1923 Bosley had contracted a degenerative kidney ailment, Bright's disease, malignant and crippling. He remained an invalid in Baltimore for a time, quarreled with his mother, and left Linden Avenue for the Rye, New York, home of a friend, Margaret Owen, a woman twenty years older, who married him as his death approached.

Under these circumstances, with Bosley and Minnie still estranged, Alger came to live with and nurse his brother at Rye during the summer of 1926, between his Hopkins graduation and his entrance into Harvard. "My stay was a family arrangement," Hiss recalls. "I was and regarded myself as the family's deputed representative sent to help one of us who needed just

\* Nor, although they mention the event, have Hiss's biographers asked for his reaction. For the impact of the Sacco-Vanzetti case on the radical development of Hiss's friend Noel Field, see Chapter IV.

the kind of practical aid I was qualified to supply. I reported regularly to them by letter an account of my stewardship." After settling in at Harvard for the year, Hiss received a call from Margaret in late October reporting Bosley's further deterioration. Alger rushed down to Rye to resume his "stewardship," this time accompanied by his sister Mary Ann, who lived in Boston with her husband. Donald and Minnie hurried up from Baltimore, and with his family at his bedside Bosley died on November 3, 1926. "His charm and precocious talents were enhanced and frozen by his lingering illness and early death," Alger later reminisced. "To this extent he became, after his death, somewhat 'legendary.' "

The years at Harvard were bridged by tragedy for Hiss: Bosley's death at the beginning and the suicide of his sister Mary Ann (Mrs. Elliot Emerson) only weeks before his graduation. Minnie Hiss had encouraged her girls to seek marriages with successful and socially prominent "catches," just as she had spurred her boys on to fame and achievement in their own names.

After graduating from Smith College in 1920, Mary Ann married a Bostonian seventeen years her senior. A wealthy member of a distinguished family, Elliot Emerson lost most of his money early in the 1920s and spent the rest of the decade trying to recover it, borrowing from Mary Ann's family (among others) in the process. These futile efforts and other marital tensions led to periodic separations, and to Mrs. Emerson's suffering two long periods of acute depression and several shorter stays in private mental sanitariums. Despite frequent visits to the Emersons during his three years at Harvard, Alger later stated that he knew nothing about his sister's mental illness or about her having been institutionalized. To him, Mary Ann's suicide came as "a sudden, irrational act" which he was "unable to comprehend." After a middle-of-the-night argument with her husband in May 1929, Mary Ann Hiss Emerson swallowed a bottle of Lysol.<sup>11</sup>

The following month, Hiss graduated and left to spend the summer in Europe, and when he returned in the fall, he began clerking for Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Soon after assuming the post, he sent Frankfurter a progress report:

I'd been intending to drop you a note this summer but my brother and I had such a peaceful quiet summer. . . .

Donie and I sat us down in Normandy at a charming but plumbingless little inn and swam and tennised and read prodigiously. . . . Our evenings were composed of beer drinking and litr'y discussion with Monet's grandson followed by early retiring. . . .

The justice is perfectly charming. . . . [Holmes] seems extremely well and strong and amazingly interested in his work. His zest for life is boundless; he takes a keen interest in his personal appearance . . . and enjoys his intellectual bouts with Justice Brandeis . . . et al. to the full.

Being with the Justice by day and with evenings well taken care of by my

first tackle [?] of domesticity (Charlie and I have a cute apartment) [Charles Willard, a law-school classmate] and week-ends free to romp off to the fields of Maryland and Virginia. I am indeed a beamish boy.

Please give my very best to Mrs. F. The two tiny flies in the vanishing cream are the loss of the Sunday afternoon teas at your home and the fact that all Washington's music is in the afternoon.<sup>12</sup>

Less than two months after writing to Frankfurter, and with almost no warning to either his friends or his family, Alger Hiss married Priscilla Fansler Hobson.

Most surprised of all concerning this sudden leap into matrimony was Justice Holmes. Frankfurter selected Holmes's law clerk each year, and the tradition had been that the young man remained unmarried for that period. Hiss later insisted that Holmes quickly became reconciled to the situation. As evidence of this, he told a recent biographer about Holmes's wedding present—Hiss's choice—a copy of the Justice's collected speeches. Holmes inscribed the volume "To Alger Hiss," but when Hiss said, "Oh, that's not enough! Write something more," the "reconciled" Holmes wrote: "Et ux" (and wife).<sup>13</sup>

Hiss assured Frankfurter that all was well in a December 13 letter, two days after his marriage:

Dear Mr. Frankfurter,

I learned some ten hours before my marriage from a chance remark . . . that the Justice had definitely stipulated that his secretaries be unmarried. Of course, I had appreciated what must be [at] the bottom of this rule—the secretary's personal affairs must never impinge upon a "scintilla" of the Justice's time or energy, and I—rather, we—laid meticulous plans to that end. As part of these plans the Justice was not informed until the last moment (the evening before the wedding). He has not shown any annoyance or foreboding. He both gave me his blessing the evening of the ceremony and his "welcome into the brotherhood" the following morning. Today he had us both to luncheon. (Of course, these are consonant, I well realize, with disapproval hidden behind the Justice's charm.)

It never occurred to me that he had a definite "rule of law" on the point.<sup>14</sup> I do see the wisdom of such a rule, however. I had been going to New York Saturday afternoon all fall to the Justice's knowledge and apparent amusement. He often chaffed me about the "dangers" I was headed for but I in no wise sensed any fiat negative to marriage qua marriage—of inconsiderateness which might reasonably grow out of a secretary's marrying he did gently complain, I suppose. The knowledge that Shulman and Justice Stone's 1928-29 secretary were both married undoubtedly made me feel that it was a question of my own integrity as to whether I should permit anything to affect my devotion to the Justice. I don't believe my getting married has altered my sense of values in that direction. . . .

Such moments of personal crisis invariably elicited from Hiss the claim that he was either unaware or unprepared for the occasion.<sup>15</sup>

After being told of Priscilla's divorce from Hobson, Hiss had renewed contact with her during the spring of 1929, shortly before his sister's

suicide. Although they saw one another several times in those months, Priscilla made it clear that she was deeply involved with another man. After Hiss's return from the summer in Europe, he contacted Priscilla only to discover that she was about to enter a New York hospital for an abortion. Priscilla's lover, according to Alger, was a New York newspaperman named William Brown Meloney, who refused to marry. Her son, Timothy Hobson, was then three years old, Alger's age at the time his father died.<sup>16</sup>

His protectiveness took hold. Alger began traveling to New York to see Priscilla each weekend, though his October 1929 letter to Frankfurter mentions only spending his weekends "romping in the fields." Priscilla shared Hiss's interest in theater and music, and she matched his knowledge of law with her own scholarly command of literature. By that time she was already a talented and experienced writer-editor and had apparently told Alger of her intention to pursue a career after their marriage.

Minnie Hiss thought Alger's plan to marry Priscilla Hobson a disaster for her son, apparently because of Priscilla's divorce, career plans, and outspokenness. Minnie refused to attend the ceremony, thoughtfully sending Alger a telegram instead which stated: "Do not take this fatal step." The telegram "arrived on their wedding day," according to John Chabot Smith, "and Alger was naïve enough to show it to Priscilla. She never forgave her mother-in-law for that; and she is still angry at Alger about it today."<sup>17</sup>

Nor did Priscilla favorably impress many of Alger's Baltimore friends, who thought her "too radical and too intellectual." Key figures in that society, notably Hiss's mother, his brother Donald, and his closest friend, William Marbury, all felt uncomfortable with her. Priscilla, in turn, did not care much for Alger's Baltimore friends, regarding them (according to Smith) as "part of his 'undergraduate' experience, which he grew out of once he was a married man." Minnie Hiss and her daughter-in-law remained on guardedly "cordial" terms during the years that followed. Donald, according to a 1949 statement by his lawyer, had little use for his brother's wife, objecting to her "on personality rather than on political grounds. . . . One reason he did not like Priscilla was that he considered her conversation too highbrow and believed that Alger and Priscilla associated with too intellectual a group." As for Marbury, recently he would say only that Priscilla "was not a popular woman. Alger's friends didn't like her very much. But I didn't know Priscilla well enough to form a judgment on her."<sup>18</sup>

An incident that epitomized the feeling of tension on both sides occurred shortly after the marriage. Hiss took his bride to a party at the William Marburys' and, as he tells the story, circulated among his friends while Priscilla remained aloof. After they left, she accused him of "disloyalty" for having enjoyed himself while "abandoning" her for the evening. At subsequent parties Hiss remained close to Priscilla.<sup>19</sup>

The unhappiness Priscilla Hiss felt in Alger's Baltimore circle changed things considerably. Initially Hiss had intended to work with a Baltimore

law firm after completing his duties for Holmes. "My present plans call for settling in Baltimore," he wrote Frankfurter on February 27, 1930. "I hope Venable, Baetjer and Howard are going to decide to take on another man after ten years! New York did lure us but I'm still strong on State's rights." Hiss passed the Maryland Bar exam in June, indicating that he still sought a job in the state at that time. Meanwhile he had turned down other possibilities. In March his friend Richard Field had arranged an invitation for Hiss to join a Boston firm, and Alger wrote Frankfurter on March 20: "I am seriously considering going with [the] firm though what Dick Field calls my 'sentimental affection' for Baltimore is strong. I must decide in a day or so but at present am far from any determination."

But Frankfurter apparently played a leading role in Hiss's decision to reject Field's offer, since four days later Alger wrote his mentor again: "Priscilla and I liked Mr. Brown [a head partner in Field's firm], and even Mrs. Brown, less than you had prophesied. . . . I have just written a letter of refusal to Mr. Brown and a most difficult one to Dick Field. I hope I was sufficiently adroit so that Dick doesn't know what your advice was. Please realize how deeply Priscilla and I appreciate Mrs. Frankfurter's and your kindness and rare sympathy."<sup>20</sup>

It was not because of pressure from Priscilla that he did not settle in Baltimore in 1930, Hiss said recently, but because he failed to obtain an adequate position. "Two leading firms" in the city, he noted, had offered him only an opportunity to read law "without charge," but without pay, in their offices. Only then did he make other arrangements. That Hiss could not have received a good offer from a leading Baltimore firm after clerking for Justice Holmes, and with Frankfurter's backing, seems extraordinary, however, and there is no evidence to suggest that he seriously sought a position there during the spring of 1930. In any event, Frankfurter had other plans for his protégé, as indicated in a letter from Hiss:

Your far too flattering letter to Mr. John Lord O'Brian [Assistant Attorney General and head of the Justice Department's Anti-Trust Division] led him to see me last week. He seemed to think that there was no doubt he could use me next fall and discussed mainly the question of where he could place me in the lists the Comptroller General had made up. My next step appears to be the "passing of the bar." I think I can arrange to be in Washington on June 17, 20 and 21 and only hope I can manage as easily to pass the examination then given.

I found Mr. O'Brian most charming and am deeply grateful for your letter to him and "hint" to me.

Despite this endorsement—Frankfurter described Hiss to O'Brian as "not only a first rate lawyer, but a man of unusual cultivation, charm, and prematurely solid judgment"—Hiss subsequently turned aside the Justice Department post. O'Brian had already offered him one in more definite terms than indicated by Hiss's letter to Frankfurter. Hiss's method of

handling the situation recalled the evasive manner in which he had dealt with other recent and uncomfortable situations, such as the decision to marry while clerking for Holmes. He simply never contacted O'Brian again. "It is my recollection," O'Brian wrote Frankfurter in 1938, "that in the winter or spring [of 1930] he applied to me for a position in the Anti-Trust Division for the following autumn. After some discussion, I told him I would appoint him. I thought he was coming down, but never heard anything further from him, except that some time during the autumn, I learned indirectly, that he had changed his plans and taken a position in Boston."<sup>21</sup>

Whatever his reasons, Hiss decided to ignore O'Brian's offer. Instead, that summer William Marbury, who had begun practicing law in Baltimore, wrote friends in Boston on Alger's behalf and helped to land him a job with Choate, Hall and Stewart, an important firm. Marbury later recalled that the choice of Boston apparently represented a compromise for both Alger and Priscilla between his earlier desire to settle in Baltimore and her yearning to return to New York. Hiss began working for Choate, Hall and Stewart in October 1930 after completing his obligations to Justice Holmes. The couple lived in Cambridge, close to the Frankfurters and to Alger's other law-school friends.<sup>22</sup>

### Jay Vivian Chambers: Disorder and Early Sorrow

"I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on April 1, 1901, as Jay Vivian Chambers," begins a deposition Chambers gave the FBI in 1949. "My parents were Jay Chambers and Laha Whittaker Chambers. . . . [My] parents had only two children, myself and my brother Richard Godfrey Chambers . . . [who] was probably born in 1904." As in Alger Hiss's autobiographical notes, the "facts" are there—but only barely. Chambers's memoir, *Witness*, tells us more:

I was born in Philadelphia on April 1, 1901. When my father, Jay Chambers, who was then a young staff artist on the *New York World*, received the startling news, he crumpled the telegram and threw it into a waste basket. He did not believe it and he did not think that April Fool jokes were in good taste. . . .

Mine was a dry birth and I weighed twelve pounds and measured fourteen inches across the shoulders. I had to be taken with instruments. After this frightful delivery, Dr. Dunning sat for several hours beside my mother, holding together the edges of a torn artery. . . . he thought that she was certainly dying. . . . My mother overcame her memory [of the agonizing childbirth] sufficiently to bear a second son, my brother, Richard Godfrey. But my terrible birth was fixed indelibly in her mind. Throughout my boyhood and my youth, she repeated to me the circumstances of that ordeal until they were vivid to me. They made me acutely unhappy, and her repetition of them made me even unhappier (for it seemed to imply a reproach). But I never told her so.

Chambers's mother apparently exaggerated both his birth size and perhaps her degree of trauma, but her account reflected the tensions that characterized life in the Chambers family.<sup>23</sup>

Shortly after his birth Jay Vivian and family moved to Brooklyn, New York. After several years they settled in Lynbrook, then a small fishing and farming village with a few hundred inhabitants on Long Island's south shore, eighteen miles from New York City. Their home was ramshackle and spartan, lacking central heat, electricity, and running water; the coalstove-heated kitchen "was the only really warm room in the house," and, Chambers recalled, "like most country people . . . we lived chiefly in the kitchen. In summer, we moved partly out of doors." The inlets, farms, and villages of southern Long Island would provide Whittaker with many of his happiest memories as a young man—"I used to go off for long rambles by myself through the woods and became very much interested in nature"—but his family life offered few such pleasures. Jay and Laha quarreled frequently.<sup>24</sup>

For one thing, the Chambers family did not fit the Lynbrook mold. Jay Vivian was born into a family of newspapermen: Jay Sr. worked initially for the *World*, but later became a successful illustrator for a New York City advertising firm. On weekends he prowled along the coves and fields around Lynbrook with his paints and canvases. Laha had once been a professional actress, but held no job while raising her two sons (afterward she worked for New York City's Welfare Department for a number of years). "My parents were the intellectuals of that period," Chambers later observed, ". . . aware of the new ideas and . . . the latest books. I was brought up in an atmosphere of no religion at all. I was quite young when I asked my mother if God made the world. She said, 'You are just picking up ideas from people.' The world was formed, she said, by gases which solidified. Her attitude, impressed upon me, was that intelligent people just don't discuss religion."<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, his parents and grandparents were all Republicans, and Chambers initially adopted this creed, supporting Calvin Coolidge while a college student in 1920. Despite the family's political conservatism, some of their Lynbrook neighbors were put off by the Chamberses, who not only failed to attend church but also, in Laha's case, spoke several languages other than English, read a great deal, and even painted pictures: "My family was regarded by the community as 'peculiar.' . . . we were called the 'French family,' that being apparently the most radical term that they could think of."<sup>26</sup>

But life in the "French Quarter" of Lynbrook was neither radical nor placid. Both Jay and Laha bore deep scars from their families' rapid descent down the ladder from their upper-middle-class beginnings; both had abandoned earlier personal ambitions.

My grandfather Whittaker [Laha's father] was a schoolteacher, a writer, an inventor and a manufacturer. He was, I think, the Superintendent of Schools in Milwaukee at one time. He founded the first magazine in the Northwest. . . . He made and lost a fortune. About the time my mother came of age, they lost their money. She had to go to work. She went on stage with a stock company and traveled all over the country. . . . Her family was then extremely poor. My grandparents opened a small restaurant. My mother waited on tables. There she met my father.

Subsequently Laha's father began teaching French in the New York schools, "was accused falsely of drinking," according to Chambers, lost his job, and "died soon after of cancer."

"Grandfather Chambers" fared somewhat better professionally but not personally. He became a political reporter in Philadelphia and married "a very shallow, cranky woman." Soon he began drinking heavily:

My grandfather was a terrific lady's man and she [his wife] knew it. . . . When my grandfather was drinking he was hard to handle. You could hear him coming at a distance and the sound of his voice was enough to frighten children. He terrified my father to a point where he was very much under the thumb of his mother. He became very quiet, shy and introspective. . . . [After studying art and going to work for a New York newspaper] he married my mother, and according to my mother's story, my grandfather did as much as possible to wreck the marriage.

Grandfather Chambers vacationed in Lynbrook every summer, Chambers would remember. "This consisted of taking me and my brother with him on a tour of saloons. This used to put my mother in a frightful state of mind."<sup>27</sup>

But Chambers associated his mother, Laha, with whatever pleasure he derived from his family. Jay remained, if not indifferent toward his sons, "then uncommunicative to the point of seeming mute." He generally kept silent on the few trips on which the boys accompanied him: to a New York studio that he maintained, or to museums, or on painting expeditions near their Lynbrook home. "Once in a long while, he would utter one word: 'Don't'—when my brother and I were doing something that he did not like." Jay Sr. declined the name "Papa" along with the role, insisting that the boys call him "Jay."

With Laha, Jay was as withdrawn and sullen most of the time as with his sons: "My earliest recollections are of my mother pacing up and down the rooms in Lynbrook carrying on imaginary and dramatic conversations with my father. There was an air of tenseness over the house. About 1908, my mother and father separated. He went to live in New York City and we stayed in Lynbrook—my mother and the two children. My father gave us, I think, \$8.00 a week to live on. To eke that out my mother raised chickens, baked cakes and grew vegetables. I developed a small route in the town selling these things."<sup>28</sup>

"I sent him away," Laha announced to her two boys—seven and four years old—that first night, and she proceeded to move their cots into her bedroom. Each night for the next three years they all slept uneasily together, with the bedroom door bolted and a heavy dresser placed against it. For a time Laha kept an ax under the bed, and each night they listened anxiously whenever noises came from the distance.

Jay had moved to Brooklyn to live with his lover and their circle of artist friends. Jay's mother left her husband in Philadelphia and moved into a nearby apartment in Brooklyn to help keep house for him, but she also visited Lynbrook frequently, much to the irritation of Laha. Although Jay Vivian (Whittaker) despised "Grandmother Chambers," he agreed later that she had been the first to describe to him the Quaker faith, which she practiced and to which he was converted during the 1940s. Yet Chambers recalled those three years as happy ones for his mother—and probably for himself and his younger brother—despite their poverty: "Without my father, our home, though divided, was tranquil."<sup>29</sup>

Just as Alger Hiss learned only during his teens that Charles Hiss had killed himself, Whittaker Chambers did not discover the true reason for his own father's absence until much later. Jay had left his family to pursue a love affair with a male friend. Presumably Chambers heard about it from Laha, who never forgave her husband's bisexuality, even after Jay returned to Lynbrook in 1911:

About three years after my parents separated, my father came back home, but he was in disgrace. The first night he went away nothing had been said to us children. My mother said he wasn't coming back anymore when I asked. This gave me a feeling of sickness which I can still feel. My mother never attacked my father to us children, but she was able to convey to us that we shouldn't like him. I couldn't stand the way he made her suffer.

When he came back, he lived entirely in his own room. When he came in the evening [from working in New York City], I used to carry up a tray of supper to him. He often made efforts to conciliate me, but I resented them. On Sundays, he had all his meals in his room. I don't think he ever came into the lower part of the house. That condition lasted until [1926]. . . . During a great many of these years, I scarcely spoke to him at all.<sup>30</sup>

Even without such talks, Jay contributed to his son's education. The Lynbrook home was filled with the books, prints, recordings, and other aesthetic evidences of Jay's and Laha's common passion for the arts. His father's tastes ran heavily toward Oriental and mystical themes, both in his commercial sketches and in personal collections (which included five illustrated editions of the *Arabian Nights* in Jay's room), capped by a passion for Pre-Raphaelite painters and writers. "Our house was a peeling outpost of what my father and mother would have summed up as 'culture' . . . visible in the overflowing bookcases and bookshelves, which were everywhere, and . . . visible in the pictures that covered the walls."<sup>31</sup>

Not often do we remember with exactitude the influences that shaped our childhood perceptions. Chambers later displayed a phenomenal recall of those years, although perhaps not always an accurate one.<sup>32</sup> He described summer visits by his "Grandfather Chambers," for example, spent mainly in Long Island taverns where the Philadelphia newspaperman discoursed on politics and world affairs while Jay Vivian and Richard Godfrey wolfed down the bar's "free lunch." His earliest memories of listening to discussions of national and international affairs, Chambers claimed, dated from those taproom tours with his grandfather.

If Grandfather Chambers provided the public conversation of his youth, Grandfather Whittaker's collection of two hundred books, stored in the family attic in Lynbrook, supplemented his family's own library and introduced him to the book that most influenced the boy's malleable intellect, "the Bible of my boyhood," Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*:

It taught me two seemingly irreconcilable things—Christianity and revolution. It taught me first of all that the basic virtue of life is humility. . . . It taught me justice and compassion. . . . That was the gist of its Christian teaching. It taught me revolution, not as others were to teach me—as a political or historical fact—but as a reflex of human suffering and desperation. . . . it corresponded exactly to a need I felt within myself.<sup>33</sup>

These influences on Whittaker's youth would play their part in Chambers's later life. But Grandmother Whittaker's (and Laha's) contribution to his education was more immediately fruitful: a gift for languages and the encouragement to study them. By the time Jay Vivian had graduated from high school, he was already fluent in French and German and he had begun plowing through language grammars in other tongues: Spanish, Italian, Gaelic, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Rumanian, and Russian—thereby laying the groundwork for his later work as a translator.

A European-born Lynbrook woman named Dorothea Maude Mont Ellen, daughter of a German orchestra leader and a friend of Laha's, encouraged Chambers's cultural interests, and he would later call her "the dominant force in the early years of my adolescence":

She had the mind of a highly cultured European. . . . She spoke Italian and French fluently . . . taught me German and French and used to talk German with me. She gave me my first understanding of music but most important she was a European and made me aware of the old European tradition of culture as a continuing process. At a later stage when I was exposed to European influences such as Marx, Lenin, Tolstoy, etc., I was prepared for them. . . . She was a very isolated person in [Lynbrook] too. . . . [But] my friendship with Mrs. Ellen was not an "affair" and there was no scandal.

Apart from his relationship with Dorothea Ellen, Chambers's high-school years passed uneventfully. He received excellent grades in English and foreign languages, but only adequate ones in other subjects, and he

worked hard at competitive sports, particularly wrestling and handball, also playing on the school basketball team. But Chambers remained a loner and made few friends in his own age group. Family pressures increased as his graduation approached, with Jay insisting that his son make plans to work while Laha urged Jay Vivian to consider entering college. Chambers and his younger brother, Richard, drifted apart while Laha and her younger son drew closer. The commitments that serve to counteract the normal narcissism and alienation of a thoughtful adolescent seemed almost entirely absent in Chambers's case as he prepared to leave high school and "choose" a life: "By degrees I told myself: I am an outcast. My family is outcast. We have no friends, no social ties, no church, no organization that we claim and that claims us, no community." For a time Jay Vivian was determined to join the Army and fight in World War I, but when his graduation came in the spring of 1919, that option no longer existed.

By graduation Chambers had decided to leave Lynbrook. At the ceremonies themselves, he performed a minor but unmistakable act of rebellion against an unsatisfying family (his parents were in the audience) and what he perceived as a community that had excluded him. Because of his talent with language, he had been chosen as "class prophet." Mixed in among the obvious assignments of future roles for classmates, he predicted that one girl would become a prostitute. The principal, outraged, withheld Chambers's diploma for a time. Meanwhile, Laha obtained a job for her restless son in a Lynbrook bank, where Jay Vivian, fighting constantly with his fellow employees, lasted only a few weeks.<sup>34</sup>

Laha's finding him this boring job as a bank clerk proved the final indignity for Chambers, and determined his next step. One day, without warning, he boarded a train for Baltimore and ran away from home.

### Whittaker: The Escape from Lynbrook

Chambers left with a companion, a Lynbrook friend named Anthony Muller. After a weekend in a Baltimore flea-bag hotel, the two young men obtained jobs as day laborers in Washington, D.C. The Baltimore company handling the work maintained rooms for their laborers in local hotels, and Chambers, who used the first of his many pseudonyms, Charles Adams, later called this period his "introduction to the proletariat."\* The laborers were "an international mob, many of whom spoke a foreign language." After four months the work ended. Chambers and Muller moved on to New Orleans, where, unable to find jobs in the post-war slump, they

\* Chambers wrote regularly to Laha during these months, but did not tell her his Washington address or alias. She and Grandfather Whittaker alerted the Washington police, but the young runaway was never found.

lived in poor quarters on short rations in the French Quarter. Occupying the next room was a prostitute nicknamed "One-Eyed Annie," and many other residents were from the area's lower depths.

Still calling himself Charles Adams, Chambers tried to ship out as a seaman, but, lacking the necessary papers, he was turned away. Finally, after several frustrating months of unemployment, Muller enlisted in the Marines and Jay Vivian wrote his family asking for money to return home.

After reaching Lynbrook late in 1919, Chambers struck a bargain with his family: he would work for his father's Manhattan advertising firm as a file clerk for the next half-year and then enter college in the fall of 1920. Because his father "was worried if he introduced me as his son the firm people would think he was favoring me," Jay passed off the boy as "Charles Whittaker," marking Chambers's first use of his mother's family name, and his second pseudonym. Most people at Seaman and Company apparently learned after a while about the relationship between "Whittaker" and Jay.

A young copywriter at the advertising firm, a Williams College graduate, urged "Charles" to enter Williams in August and not Columbia, as he intended. Laha also seemed "enthusiastic for Williams," according to her son. Her cosmopolitanism, it seemed, had limits: "She had always been against Columbia because of the number of Jews and because it was such a big place." Chambers traveled to Williams in September, passed an entrance exam, and had his furniture and personal possessions shipped up. But he left after a single day, having "decided Williams was not for me. I was sure my parents could not stand the expense." He took a train to New York, went immediately to Columbia even before returning home, and managed to enroll. For the entire school year Chambers lived in Lynbrook while commuting daily to Columbia.<sup>35</sup>

Columbia College during the 1920s was a haven for talented young men with literary or artistic interests, many of them Jews, and Chambers quickly joined forces with a group that shared his cultural concerns and more than matched him intellectually. Upon entering the school, "Whit" (as most of his Columbia friends called him) found Mark Van Doren, the poet and literary critic, assigned as his faculty advisor. Van Doren soon became a friend as well, as did a number of fellow students who went on to impressive careers as writers, scholars, and public figures. The list of classmates with whom Chambers became friendly at Columbia includes art historian Meyer Schapiro, literary critic Lionel Trilling, writer-editor-radio personality Clifton Fadiman, theatrical critic John W. Gassner, poet Louis Zukofsky, and journalists Charles Wagner and Herbert Solow. Among the others with whom he fraternized were the poet Langston Hughes, the philosopher Mortimer Adler, prosecutor Frank Hogan, and two men—David Zabladowsky and Irving Kaplan—who later figured in Chambers's experience as an underground Communist.<sup>36</sup>

Although Alger Hiss made and retained friends from each of his youthful social worlds—Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard Law—Chambers drew only from his Columbia circle (other than from later Communist associates) for his close relationships during the 1920s and 1930s. That first year, each day he and about a dozen other undergraduates—mainly commuters like himself—would eat their bagged lunches together in the college gym:

They lived an intense, intellectual life, almost wholly apart from the life of the campus [he later reminisced]. They were a cohesive group, bound together by a common origin, a common flight from a common fear, and a common poverty. . . . They were Jewish, of course, but my inexperience in such matters may be judged from the fact that for a long time, I supposed that Schapiro was an Italian name.

All of them were intensely serious. Not that they did not laugh. They laughed a great deal. Their humor was at times highly intellectual. At other times, their humor was extremely earthy. . . .

Their seriousness was organic. It was something utterly new in my experience. It sprang from a struggle in which to gain an inch was the achievement of a lifetime. . . . My strange luncheon companions were *ernste Menschen* [serious men]—and with good reason, for most of them were sitting there as a result of a struggle with a warping poverty impossible for those who have not glimpsed it to imagine. . . . They came from a stock that, after God, worshipped education and the things of the mind. They were there, in most cases, by acts of superhuman sacrifice and contrivance on the part of their families. To me, that seriousness was deeply impressive. . . . It spoke directly to a seriousness within myself, that sprang from no such struggle as theirs, but partook of a similar organic attitude toward life.

Less charitably, Chambers would tell the FBI in 1949: “From these young zealots I had my first exposure to Marxists’ ideas. We used to have long and violent arguments in which they tried to convert me to Marxism.” The “conversion” efforts during Whittaker’s first two and a half years at Columbia, if they occurred at all, proved unsuccessful. Instead—largely through the influence of Van Doren and of friends such as Schapiro, Zukofsky, and Fadiman—Chambers “converted” to an apolitical aestheticism. Van Doren, a liberal humanist, apparently tempered the fuzzy mysticism with which Chambers had toyed prior to entering Columbia: “I wrote some religious poetry which I showed to Van Doren. . . . He said that . . . ‘it contained a pathological [pathetic?] fallacy,’ which I had never heard of until then [and which], according to Van Doren, was that ‘God operates in nature.’”<sup>37</sup>

Van Doren and Whittaker’s student friends also gently spoofed “Whit’s” residual Republicanism. Chambers had been a fan of Calvin Coolidge ever since, as Governor of Massachusetts in 1919, Coolidge received unearned credit for stopping the Boston Police Strike. He also wrote as English-class themes for Van Doren editorials expressing his conservative

political views: "Mark asked me into his office after class. He praised my editorial writing, but he wondered, with his infectious chuckle, whether the Russian Revolution was really as bad as I supposed, or whether Calvin Coolidge was as good." Van Doren later recalled Chambers going "about the University [in 1920] putting up posters for Mr. Coolidge. This caused some comment because people at Columbia did not take an active part in political campaigns in those days."

Moving into a Columbia dormitory room for his sophomore year in the fall of 1921, Chambers shifted his primary allegiance from the bag-lunch Marxists to another group of predominantly Jewish students, most from "comfortable homes, but [who also] shared the same general view of life as my locker room friends. They were also *ernste Menschen*." Most would become writers (a few painters), and in their company—Schapiro's, Trilling's, Fadiman's, Zukofsky's, Wagner's, Gassner's, and Solow's, to name only the most prominent—Chambers began to write poems and short stories, many of them for *The Morningside*, the Columbia literary magazine which he later helped edit. Fadiman subsequently summarized the assessment of Whittaker's Columbia friends: "he considered Chambers at that time a brilliant poet and . . . he thought it was too bad that Chambers did not in later life concentrate on his writing because he felt that if Chambers had done so, he would [have become] a renowned literary figure. . . ." <sup>38</sup>

But Chambers remained restless at Columbia, cutting classes frequently and spending much time in the gym playing handball or wrestling. When not writing, he read prodigiously in several European literatures, especially Russian and German, which he read in the original. Like many of his Columbia classmates, Chambers had become a humanistic "free-thinker," alienated from formal religion. He rejected ideologies of every description—Christianity, Communism, even Republicanism and his beloved Cal Coolidge, who would soon become President. Chambers's behavior became erratic by 1922, and he developed an addiction to sometimes brutal pranks and a passion to shock.

In November 1922 this newly acquired and calculated playfulness led to removal from Columbia. Chambers had become editor-in-chief of *The Morningside* that term. In the first issue produced under his direction, and with Van Doren's approval, Whittaker published under the pseudonym "John Kelly" a one-act drama called *A Play for Puppets*, containing a simple story line and mildly scatological verses. Two Roman centurions guard Christ's tomb. They swap tales of Mark Anthony and Caesar, discuss the delights of love-making, and one centurion observes that Jesus "never lay with a woman." Angels come to announce Christ's resurrection, but Jesus declines to leave with them. He claims to be only a simple carpenter's son, until the "Voice of God" calls him. "CHRIST (meekly following angel off right): I am the truth, the way, and the light." The centurions resume their conversation—the old one fearful about losing the body, the young one

reflecting on his woman. Van Doren said at the time—and later—that he thought the playlet excellent: It “dealt with Christ as a human being, that He did not want to be resurrected and wanted to be allowed to sleep and that this was somewhat in the Anatole France tradition.”<sup>39</sup>

Running through *A Play for Puppets* is a theme that characterized Chambers’s writing and reflections before his commitment to Communism later in the decade, the destruction of an individual’s goodness (as embodied in Jesus) by both established society and organized religion—and a yearning for life’s termination. Thus the “Voice of Christ” intones: “Who is breaking my sleep? . . . What is God? . . . Heaven? Let me sleep. I am weary. . . . Do not men live and do not men die? I wish to sleep. . . . Roll back the stone and go thy way. It is very quiet in the earth and I will sleep.”

Yet Chambers may not have intended to expose his personal discontent so directly, nor perhaps did he anticipate the drastic reaction of university authorities to *A Play for Puppets*. Van Doren had approved its publication, and Chambers had used the “John Kelly” pseudonym in an apparent effort to defuse criticism. Still, the image of a Christ figure left so weary by life that he preferred peaceable death to resurrection related intimately to Whittaker’s sketch earlier that year in *The Morningside* of “Everett Holmes,” the dead hero of the autobiographical story to which Chambers assigned—with heavy-handed irony—the title “The Damn Fool”: “He wasn’t a Bolshevik. He was a Puritan, perhaps. That is a radical, of course. He was an extremist,” a friend says of the deceased Holmes. “A man’s praise was the one thing he had never had, and now he fought and lived [in the anti-Bolshevik armies] in the tremendous energy of their devotion.” The two men debate Holmes’s death. One calls him “a damn fool”: “What he did gives weakness a false appearance of glory. He wasn’t glorious. How many weary miles did he tramp to escape himself.” The other, apparently the authorial voice, is wry but more sympathetic: “He gained some things, though, I think. I did not say he was glorious. He was a strange chap.” A flip and all-pervasive cynicism, an unserious amoralism, permeated Whittaker’s writings and his behavior during this period.<sup>40</sup>

After New York newspapers began publicizing his “blasphemous” issue of *The Morningside*, Chambers resigned from its editorial board, and two months later, after conferring with a college dean over the incident, he withdrew “voluntarily” from Columbia. “I’m leaving for good,” Chambers told a friend after meeting with Dean Herbert Hawkes. “He wants all copies of *Morningside* confiscated and an apology. It can’t be done and I’m leaving college.” “We go,” the friend’s present-tense recollection continues, “to a Chinese restaurant on 110th Street to talk things over. But it seems that all we do is laugh things over. Whittaker was never happier. Something ha[s] been released in him and his usual wit has an edge of fire, Promethean fed with Shavian shavings.”<sup>41</sup>

After leaving Columbia, Chambers began an experimental, rootless, creative, but disintegrating period in his life. It lasted almost a decade before stabilizing in 1931 with marriage, readmission to the Communist Party, and an editorship at *The New Masses*. At first, the withdrawal did not noticeably affect his ties to Columbia. Whittaker continued to meet regularly with friends, sleep over often in their dormitory rooms, and take part in their revels. Shortly after the furor over *A Play for Puppets*, Chambers began drinking heavily for the first time—and after his initial encounter with whiskey in his dorm room, “I tore the place apart.”

His evident restlessness led Van Doren, who had not succeeded in quieting the attacks on his pupil by Columbia faculty colleagues and administrators, to suggest that Whittaker go abroad. “Why don’t you go to Soviet Russia?” Chambers later remembered Van Doren urging him. “The Russian Revolution is like Elizabethan England. All the walls are falling down. You should go and see it.” In Meyer Schapiro’s room at Columbia, Chambers met a young man named Sender Garlin who was then working for Russian-American Relief, an organization that sought to alleviate the famine then afflicting the Soviet Union. He made one effort that spring—whether inspired by Van Doren, by Garlin, or independently—to join the relief program for Russia’s famine organized separately by the American Friends Service Committee. Whittaker recalled having been received warmly in Philadelphia by Quaker officials when he first applied, but the Quakers rejected him after learning about the *Play for Puppets* incident.

While in Philadelphia, Chambers stayed at his grandfather’s house. One night the police phoned to report his grandfather’s illness. Whittaker rushed to the address and found him dead: “It was in the house of this ‘other woman’ that my grandfather died.” Whittaker arranged with the editor of the paper for which the elder Chambers had worked to write a story stating “that he died en route to his own residence and had gone to the nearest house for aid.”<sup>42</sup>

When Chambers traveled to Europe in the summer of 1923, it was not to help feed starving Russians, but to wander through Germany and Belgium with two Columbia friends, Meyer Schapiro and Henry Zelinsky. The trio lived in Berlin for a month, then proceeded to Brussels and—in Whittaker’s case—to Paris before returning to the United States in September.

His experiences in Europe that summer had drawn him initially toward Communism, Chambers later argued, as a result of firsthand observation of the physical devastation and economic distress wrought by World War I. He recalled returning to live in his parents’ Lynbrook home, where he read widely in Fabian socialist, Marxian socialist, and other classic schools in the literature of modern social protest, if only to try to comprehend the “crisis” he believed to be overtaking the West. He concluded, in Spenglerian fashion, that an America seemingly dedicated to sexual revolt, bootleg

whiskey, and campus hijinks was in fact a "dying world . . . without faith, hope, character, understanding of its malady or will to overcome it."<sup>48</sup>

Despite Chambers's version, the historical record indicates that observations of European decay, explorations of socialist classics, and reflections on Communist ideology played only supporting roles, at best, in Whittaker Chambers's decision to join the American Communist Party. He appeared preoccupied at the time—his letters suggest—not with political but with aesthetic concerns and with his own dwindling literary output.

During the year following his return from Europe in the fall of 1923, Chambers wrote little and preserved even less. His decision to join the Communist Party in 1925 was apparently triggered by an inability to resolve a series of emotional crises stemming from personal and family experiences. It was his family, particularly, that for Whittaker "seemed to represent in miniature the whole crisis of the middle class."

Drifting away from Lynbrook, he took a position at the main branch of the New York Public Library, supervising the Newspaper Room in the evenings. This left his days free for writing and allowed him the further luxury of using the library as a base of operations for reading and study. Although Chambers met a number of Communists working there, he made no move to join the CP for a time. Instead, he alternated periods spent living in Lynbrook (his mother was "at me to complete my college course") with periods spent living with a friend, James Green,\* a fellow Columbia College dropout. The two men first shared a room in Manhattan, and during the summer of 1924 they set up a large tent in a hollow between the dunes at Atlantic Beach on Long Island's southern shore, not far from Lynbrook. Green worked in Manhattan and would come out on weekends, while Chambers would also spend weekdays in the tent, commuting to New York to work at the library each evening: "[I] spent most of the time there by myself. It was in that tent that I [studied] Fabian Socialism."

James Green often brought his younger brother, Lewis,\* then in his final year of high school in Lynbrook, out to Atlantic Beach. Over the next few years Chambers's friendship with James cooled, but he became close to Lewis Green. Sometime during that period he also met and fell in love with a married woman. It happened when Atlantic Beach "began to develop, so we crossed Broad Channel across from Atlantic Beach and began to camp there. Presently other campers began to cluster around us. One of these was a Mrs. Mainland and her children. Mrs. Mainland was a Socialist." The lady whom Chambers dubbed "Mrs. Mainland" and met sometime in 1924 (he obviously did not use her real name) soon became important to Whittaker, although what little is known about her comes indirectly from a few of Chambers's 1924 letters to Meyer Schapiro and Mark Van Doren. To Schapiro during midsummer Chambers enthused:

\* A pseudonym.

I have spent the whole day with a noble woman and her two beautiful children, a boy and a girl. What more can a man want? Indeed I want little else. . . . I might as well tell you the truth, Meyer. I'm tangled with another woman. Now, it is alright. The happiest I have known: the happiest I have been for a long time. But it should not have come now. Too many sleepless nights and days gentle and libidinous. There is a satiation in the happiness itself. I feel wrung and heavy. And it all seems bound up [Here Schapiro's copy of the letter breaks off] . . .

To Van Doren, Chambers wrote in September that he had decided to return to Columbia in the fall: "I have an unconventional partner in this world for whom I care very much, and it is she who is urging me to this reversal. . . . She argues (and in this I think she is right) that my present job ideally permits me to study. I shall keep it and pay my own way. And I am happy to do what she wishes."<sup>44</sup>

Chambers did not last out the term. He did poorly on several midterm exams, stopped attending classes entirely around Thanksgiving, and by semester's end had dropped most of his courses. But he continued working at the library. Why he failed to follow through on his earlier enthusiasm for returning to school—"I have seldom felt so eager and so active," he had written Van Doren in September—remains obscure. Chambers and his "unconventional partner" apparently broke off by the following year, by which time Whittaker had begun another love affair. Meyer Schapiro recalled Chambers getting drunk once in late 1924 and speaking about a mistress he had in Brooklyn (Atlantic Beach?) who had recently borne his child, a son named Richard (presumably after Chambers's younger brother, Richard Godfrey).<sup>\*</sup> But, apart from some fragmentary traces of the relationship with "Mrs. Mainland," she disappeared from Chambers's life without further mention to friends.<sup>45</sup>

Even without the break-up of a love affair, the closing months of 1924 proved excruciatingly difficult for Whittaker because of events connected with the three generations of his family then living in Lynbrook. "In that period I used to wander a great deal at night, brooding on my family," he later wrote, "which seemed to represent in miniature the whole crisis of the middle class." Caught in Whittaker's "miniature crisis" were his violent, senile grandmother; his reclusive father; his possessive mother; and his suicidal brother.

Grandmother Whittaker, who had lived with Laha's family since her husband's death in 1920, needed almost constant attention. "It was feared that she might kill one of us," Chambers recalled, "so it was arranged that I used to sit up at night and watch her."

<sup>\*</sup> That fall Chambers published a story in the December 1924 *Morningside* about a mother and her son "Robert" who goes off to war and dies. The story bore a dedication: "In Memory of R.G."

She had delusions that someone was trying to asphyxiate her with gas and was poisoning her food; therefore, she took to cooking in her own room. She kept the door to her room shut and locked and sat in there at night screaming unpleasantly about my father. Frequently I was sent to take knives away from her and to step between her and my father when she threatened him with scissors. . . .

But Laha made no move to institutionalize her mother. Grandmother Whittaker's behavior may have seemed to Laha fit punishment for her husband's transgressions and not much stranger than most other aspects of life at her house.\*

"One night around midnight," late in 1924, "I suddenly came upon my grandmother standing alone at a trolley stop" in East Rockaway. Chambers often wandered through this area, if only because Mrs. Mainland apparently lived nearby. "I thought she [his grandmother] was living in New York [after having earlier run away from Lynbrook]. She did not show any surprise at seeing me. She said something about someone calling to her and asked me if I couldn't hear the voice. I urged her to go home but presently she took a trolley to Brooklyn and it was a short time after that she was picked up in Jersey City." Grandmother Whittaker lived at the Jersey City YWCA until she landed in the psychiatric ward of a local hospital one night, having run into the street in her nightgown crying that "those old Jews had drilled a hole in her ceiling and started to pump gas into her room."<sup>46</sup>

When Chambers was not disarming his grandmother—"the small scars on my hand," he would write, "are where the scissors missed my father and caught me"—he found himself acting as custodian for his brother, who at Christmas 1924 had returned from his first months in college, thoroughly disoriented. According to Chambers, Richard had been "a completely different character from me . . . gentle, merry and athletic." But his brother now seemed quite different. He drank heavily, "had become an atheist and . . . a complete skeptic in every field, apparently as a result of reading works by French Enlightenment rationalists," or so Whittaker believed.

Although Chambers later described Richard's newfound cynicism in terms similar to his own earlier experiences at Columbia, in his own case there had existed a community of friends with whom to share this post-adolescent confusion. Richard's disillusionment cut directly to the source of their mutual despair, not the "social crisis" but the wrenching nature of their family life. "Look around you," Whittaker quotes his brother, "look at people. Every one of them is a hypocrite. Look at the world. It is hopeless. . . . Look at marriage. Look at Mother and Jay. What a fraud! Look at the family. Look at ours! . . . We're hopeless people. We can't cope with the world. . . . We're too gentle to face the world." Chambers argued with

\* Grandmother Whittaker was finally committed to a sanatorium several months before her death in 1929.

Richard that the Communists "have found a way out," but Richard ridiculed the Marxist dream as well.<sup>47</sup>

Whatever compassion Whittaker then felt toward Richard was inevitably mixed with resentment. His younger brother had supplanted him as their mother's favorite "problem child." Whittaker was already twenty-three, working full-time, had returned to school, and seemed content. Richard, on the other hand, needed as much attention as Grandmother Whittaker, and Laha dispatched her older son to accompany Richard on his nightly tours of Long Island speakeasies. Chambers recalled many evenings spent watching Richard and his cronies get drunk while he (Chambers) would sit nearby talking politics with radical immigrant workers. Often Richard would propose that they commit suicide together, but Whittaker claimed that he rejected such a pact each time his brother suggested one.

For a time, early in 1925, Richard curbed his suicidal impulses. He fell in love with a Lynbrook girl and began sneaking her at night into a little house no larger than a toolshed that he had built for himself in back of his parents' home. Jay Sr. learned about the trysting and one night, when Richard returned home drunk, began pummeling his son. Whittaker walked in on the scene and "turned on my father. We had a fight in which I beat my father up. It was after this that my brother married the girl."

First, however, Richard tried to kill himself. "One night he did not meet me at the train as he usually did before an evening's carousing, and that worried me. On some hunch, I looked into the little house and found him with the gas on, unconscious. I carried him into the big house and brought him back to consciousness. He cursed me for bringing him back to life."<sup>48</sup>

Whittaker Chambers's precise reasons for becoming a Communist in 1925 are unknown. But his decision came during a period that included many elements of personal failure: the collapse of his love affair, the inability to complete his term at Columbia, and an even greater degree of private anguish. A skein of interrelated family dramas preoccupied Whittaker during the months prior to his joining the Communist Party, each drama complicating the others. The cumulative strain of managing his unbalanced family—with his grandmother's violent seizures, Richard's nightly binges and periodic suicidal urges, Laha's neurotic harangues, and Jay's single brutal outburst—undoubtedly took its toll.

Which of these episodes set off the final "crisis" of Whittaker's family, which of these unresolvable problems drove him to try to cauterize his emotional wounds at the social level, remains impossible to determine. But Chambers's earliest commitment to Communism apparently represented an effort to extricate himself from Lynbrook and from a family melodrama that had become unbearable. By providing him with a sense of purpose at this confused and disturbing moment, Whittaker's decision to commit

himself represented a desperate effort at restoring some sanity to his life. "It was inevitable," he wrote Mark Van Doren in March 1925. "On February 17, I joined the Communist Party. Now I am busy from morning till night, and at night too, but I am also happy and healthy with a feeling of singular mental well being."<sup>49</sup> Chambers hardly exaggerated. His involvement in the Communist Party over the next year and a half probably kept him alive, especially after the family tragedy that he most feared and most expected finally occurred.

### Alger and Priscilla: Moving Left

Neither of the Hisses has talked much, publicly, about their years in Boston and New York between 1930 and 1933. At Choate, Hall and Stewart, Hiss assisted John Hall in preparing an important and complicated case involving the Gillette Safety Razor Company. Priscilla had worked as a librarian during their final months in Washington, but she apparently found no job in Cambridge and settled into uneasy domesticity caring for Alger and Timothy. Hiss's circle of Cambridge friends included few women who could match Priscilla's lively intelligence. She became friendly with the few, such as Marion Frankfurter, who could.

Boston, however, was clearly Alger's world and not hers, as one of Hiss's biographers noted: "I'm not sure, the wife of one of Alger's close friends recalled, 'that anyone knew Priscilla very well.' Almost all of 'their' friends were his friends. Priscilla felt alone and left out." Harvey Bundy, a Choate partner, confirmed this estimate of Priscilla by Alger Hiss's Boston circle: "The office liked him very much when he was here [at Choate]. They didn't like his wife much—Priscilla. . . . She was a kind of wild-eyed do-gooder. I don't know. They didn't trust her. . . . She seemed to have some of the aspects of a *femme fatale*." Alger appeared content in Boston-Cambridge. Practicing corporate law with a major firm presented a challenge, and he also found himself renewing friendships, such as the one with Felix Frankfurter, begun several years earlier.<sup>50</sup>

But Priscilla would not settle for the subordinate role as "Alger Hiss's wife." After a brief involvement in social work, she received a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, collaborating with her sister-in-law, Roberta Fansler, an art historian, to study research in the fine arts.\* Priscilla promptly moved to New York in the fall of 1931, taking an apartment in the building near Columbia University where her sister-in-law and brother lived. Although the Hisses gave up their Cambridge apartment, Alger remained in Boston for more than six months, staying with the Richard

\* Their book, *Research in Fine Arts in American Colleges and Universities*, appeared in 1934.

Fields during the week and commuting to New York on weekends. But during the spring of 1932, with completion of his work on the Gillette case, he resigned from Choate and obtained a job with Cotton and Franklin, a New York corporate-law firm.<sup>51</sup>

While in Cambridge, Hiss had renewed an earlier interest in labor law and social reform, according to his biographer, reading for the first time writings by Karl Marx, Robert Owen, and Sidney Webb. Despite Hiss's well-paying job and comfortable life-style, which included live-in maids and child care for Timothy, evidences of social misery surfaced in most neighborhoods of Depression-era Boston and New York. In Manhattan, Priscilla had become deeply involved in both the humanitarian and the organizational aspects of socialism. She joined the Columbia-area branch of the Socialist Party in 1930 even before having moved to New York, according to their records. Both she and her brother registered as Socialists on the 1932 Morningside Heights voting rolls, and Priscilla attended meetings while donating to the party. Shack colonies known as Hoovervilles lined Riverside Drive only blocks from her building, and the Socialist Party opened soup kitchens along Broadway that co-existed with those run by the Salvation Army. Priscilla apparently worked as a volunteer in one such dispensary. "Hiss had no objection to all this," according to John Chabot Smith; "he thought it quite right and proper, and he attended some of the meetings with his wife to hear about the Socialists' proposals for relief of the poor and reform of the economic system."<sup>52</sup>

In New York, Hiss's legal work dealt largely with his firm's defense of the Radio Corporation of America, which was involved in anti-trust litigation, and it kept him busy many evenings and weekends. Although Priscilla continued to collaborate with Roberta Fansler on the fine-arts project, the Hisses moved from Morningside Heights during the spring of 1932 to a more attractive and fashionable apartment on Central Park West. In the little free time available to him, Hiss worked with a group of attorneys interested in labor law, including both liberals and Communists, in a newly formed organization known as the International Juridical Association. The group included several other Harvard Law people such as Lee Pressman and Nathan Witt. "In the winter of 1932-33," Hiss later wrote, "I must have attended three or four meetings of contributors or editors, and my name may even have appeared on the masthead if there was any listing of editors and contributors. As on the [law] review we divided up recent cases [in labor law] for reading and analysis and discussed the articles which should be prepared. I wrote two or three articles myself though I do not remember the topics."<sup>53</sup>

The Association published a bulletin devoted mainly to labor-law and civil-liberties cases, and it served as a meeting ground for some young lawyers interested in social reform, many of whom, like Hiss, spent their

days working in corporate practice. Hiss resigned from the IJA when he left for Washington in 1933. Another member of the group, Jerome R. Hellerstein, recalled:

The members of the Association in 1932 were men of "liberal" points of view. Some few of them were probably out and out Communists. These included Carol King and Joseph Brodsky, who was then attorney for the Communist Party. However, there were many other liberals who were not Communists. . . . Lee Pressman and Nat Witt also were active in the group. They were not Communists, at least at that time. . . . Alger's only contribution was to write a few articles for the bulletin and to attend a few of the open forum meetings. Hellerstein recalls one meeting at the New School related to foreclosure of farm mortgages at which Alger made a speech. . . . Hellerstein says that the Association was not Communist dominated. . . . [He] knew Alger fairly well in 1932, visited at his house in New York, met and liked Priscilla. He knew that she was a member of the Socialist party. He, Hellerstein, was not.<sup>54</sup>

But one of the Communists mentioned by Hellerstein, Carol King, did not share, in later discussions with Hiss's attorneys, his assessment of the IJA.

. . . Mrs. King thought that Hiss made a mistake in denying membership in any Communist Front organization [in HUAC testimony]. She said that the International Juridical Association is on the Attorney General's list, that this seems rather silly since the organization was dissolved in 1941, but that Hiss was a member of it [in 1932-3] and that his name appeared on the letterhead of the National Committee of this organization. She said that she knew Alger and Priscilla Hiss and liked them very much.<sup>55</sup>

It is doubtful that Hiss became either a Socialist or a Communist during this period. But, influenced both by Priscilla's Socialism and by the more radical perspectives of friends such as Pressman and King on the IJA, Alger's beliefs shifted leftward.

Priscilla's Socialist commitment seemed much stronger than Alger's at the time. It went beyond merely voting and provisioning soup kitchens into organizing new coalitions of American radicals. While Alger spent his free hours working for the IJA, Priscilla helped found a new group called the American Labor Associates, an organization of dissidents from the traditional parties of the left, which described itself as "a cooperative, non-profit making research, study, publishing, and distributing organization, created . . . to study, analyze, and interpret factual developments and the movement of ideas in the American social order and their bearings on the course and the aims of the labor movement."<sup>56</sup>

During the spring of 1932 the ALA held several meetings to gain supporters and raise funds for a monthly magazine. The group's "Advisory Board," listed on the American Labor Associates' letterhead, included Communists, Socialists, and non-affiliated radicals—including Priscilla Hiss. On June 15, 1932, the ALA held a planning session. The agenda for

discussion, a document entitled "Next Steps in Radicalism: An Outline," included standard militant rhetoric of the time such as this passage:

Revolutions do not, by themselves, come out of depressions, however severe. . . . Two basic pre-conditions of a revolutionary overturn are essential: the existence of *an organized purposive revolutionary movement*, and *a revolutionary situation* with a progressive impairment of the governmental machinery of the ruling class.

The document concluded that "the task of revolutionary radicals in this situation seems to be that of building a revolutionary movement. . . ." "Radicals" were urged to "be active in the conservative unions, the Socialist Party, the Communist organizations . . . and in various lay organizations where social and economic issues come to a head."<sup>57</sup>

One participant at the American Labor Associates' agenda meeting was a non-member, the radical philosophy teacher Corliss Lamont, who wrote Sidney Hook:

Enclosed is agenda of meeting I attended Wed. night. Persons checked on letter-head present, as well as others making about 40 in all. . . . Discussion was interesting *and* futile. I don't see how you can get 40 people of this type to agree on a program for a magazine.

Among the names checked on the ALA letterhead by Lamont, indicating that she attended the meeting, was Priscilla Hiss's.<sup>58</sup> Her active membership in the ALA and her work within the Socialist Party indicate a strong commitment to radical social change during the 1932-3 Depression years when the Hisses lived in New York. Both Alger and Priscilla had already been considerably "radicalized" long before the election of a Democratic reform administration caused the couple to move from New York City to Washington.

### Whittaker: The Prodigal Communist

"Is there still a Communist Party?" Clifton Fadiman asked when Whittaker told him about his ideological conversion. When Chambers decided to join the Communist Party in 1925, most of his friends and former Columbia classmates were apolitical and interested mainly in the arts and their own careers. None of them could even help Whittaker make contact with a CP member to arrange for his own initiation; to them the Party seemed a haven largely for foreign-speaking immigrant workers and not an appropriate place for an educated American WASP with literary talent such as their brooding, secretive friend. But Whittaker's habit of self-dramatization had long since become familiar to Columbia intimates, and most viewed this move toward Communism as merely his latest "mystification," in Meyer Schapiro's word. Schapiro, Fadiman, Trilling, Zukofsky, Van Doren, and the others to whom Chambers announced his plan found it odd but unsurprising.

It was Sender Garlin who put him into contact, Chambers said, with the small and elusive Communist Party. "Garlin arranged for me to be introduced to Charles [actually Sam] Krieger, whom I later learned used the alias, Clarence Miller," a CP member then working for a Yonkers newspaper. "Krieger brought me to my first Communist Party meeting, which was held in a loft at about West 57th Street and the North River. The Branch at this address was known as the English-speaking Branch," indicating the preponderance of immigrants in the Party at that time, at least in New York. "I was admitted to membership . . . at this first meeting." A few days later Chambers received his Communist Party card at the group's New York headquarters in Union Square from a man named "Bert Miller."\* In the month that followed, Chambers tried unsuccessfully to recruit two Columbia friends for the Party, Zukofsky and Gassner, and took them to meetings of the English-speaking Branch.<sup>59</sup>

Sam Krieger, who served as Chambers's sponsor, provided a firsthand account of Whittaker's early Communist days. He recalled contacting Chambers first at the Public Library's Newspaper Room:

[After] bringing him into the Communist Party, I maintained a relationship with him that was also of a social nature, because that was also part of recruiting someone: you made sure that that person got an education in the ways and the habits of Communist Party members and that person fitted into the activities or life of the Communist Party members. So that in addition to just going to Party meetings with Whittaker, I had to make sure that he read certain books at the time and that he acquired basic knowledge of the important material that went into the thinking of Communist Party members—for instance, a knowledge of Marx, Engels, Lenin—and that he engaged also—in addition to reading, or perhaps attending some workers' school or study group—that the new recruit undertook to do some sort of important day-to-day work . . . physically, like distribute the paper *The Daily Worker*, or sell literature. . . . In this case, Whittaker undertook to distribute *The Daily Worker* to newsstands and collect the unsold copies. . . . And I think he enrolled in a workers' school.

Encouraged by Krieger, Chambers joined a study group run by the Socialist economist Scott Nearing at the Rand School. Nearing's seminar studied "The Law of Social Revolution," and Krieger and his wife belonged to the group. Krieger and Chambers had drawn close—along with Party work, they shared a common passion for handball at the Yonkers YMCA—but Chambers lost contact with his sponsor shortly afterward.<sup>†60</sup>

\* Chambers met "Bert Miller" twenty-three years later under his real name, Ben Mandel, as HUAC's Research Director.

† Krieger became an important Communist organizer during the Gastonia textile strike of 1929. After being jailed by local authorities, Krieger and several other union leaders fled to the Soviet Union, where he lived for a time during the 1930s. In 1977 he was living in retirement in California. Interviews with Sam Krieger, August 14–15, 1974. See also Fred Beals, *Proletarian Journey*, passim, for the Gastonia strike and Soviet Union phases of Krieger's life.

Chambers continued to live in Lynbrook during his apprenticeship as a Communist, but family problems did not lessen. During the summer of 1925 he left his job at the library and spent six weeks hitchhiking across the country to Seattle. Chambers later recalled joining the IWW while in the West, having hitched for a time on his way out with a wobbly: "He gave me instructions on how to jump freight trains. In those days each train was ruled by an IWW man and there was a distinct advantage in having an IWW card." But Whittaker did not involve himself in union work and spent some of his time on the trip writing poetry. Two of the poems later appeared in *The Nation* through the help of Van Doren, then the magazine's literary editor.<sup>61</sup>

Back in New York, Chambers resumed Communist Party activities, went to work again at the library, and again fell in love with a married woman, Gertrude Zimmerman Hutchinson, the wife of a journalist named Kenneth Hutchinson, who met Chambers that fall at the NYPL. Her husband found out about the affair:

He and I took a long bus ride one evening [Chambers recalled], at which time he asked me to lay off his wife, which I did. However, she wouldn't lay off me. She used to come up to the library at night and hang over my desk until I finally got rough and told her it was over. This lasted for some months. She later became a Communist, and having separated from Hutchinson in about 1925,\* she rented a very small house in Whitestone, Long Island. She was working then on the Encyclopedia Britannica. One night, she either came to the library or I met her by chance, and she suggested that I go to her home with her. Thereafter, I moved in with her in this Whitestone house. I lived there with her for about a year.<sup>†62</sup>

Despite his involvement with Gertrude Hutchinson, Whittaker spent part of the next summer on another westward swing, this time in style. He recalled buying a Ford roadster and driving to Montana with Lewis Green, known as "Bub." Chambers had planned initially to visit a friend in Seattle, but the tourists ran out of money in Montana and turned back. Neither man has left an account of their experiences, but both later denied a homosexual relationship, although they acknowledged in remarkably similar terms that "if there was such a relationship he [Green] never realized it; it was never a physical relationship but it might have been . . . psychological. . . ."

\* Chambers erred throughout this FBI statement by a year, which meant that her separation occurred in 1926.

† Chambers became successively involved with three Jewish women during this period: Gertrude Zimmerman Hutchinson, 1925-29; Ida Dales, 1929-31; and Esther Shemitz, whom he married in 1931. Jacob Burck, a friend and fellow Communist at the time, speculated about Chambers's predilection for Jewish women. Chambers told Burck that he had been circumcised when he was six because of an infection. But the explanation probably has much more to do with propinquity than anatomy or ethnicity; most of Chambers's friends at this time, male or female, were Jewish.

Green's family (brother James excepted) strongly disapproved of Bub's association with Chambers, six years his senior.<sup>63</sup>

Chambers's androgynous sexual enthusiasms during this period emerged in a skillful poem, "Tandaradei," which appeared in June 1926 in a small quarterly called *Two Worlds* run by a young publisher of erotica named Samuel Roth. "Tandaradei" blurs all distinction between male and female, describing the actions of two lovers who could be of either sex—or of both.<sup>64</sup>

At about the time Chambers and Gertrude Hutchinson resumed their love affair, Whittaker's brother complicated matters further. First, he married his Lynbrook girlfriend, who had apparently become pregnant, and settled in Rockville Center, a nearby town. Laha and Jay Sr. did not attend the wedding. Richard, unemployed, continued drinking, and the marriage quickly fell apart. Richard returned to his "little house" in Lynbrook, where Whittaker foiled a second suicide attempt. Chambers still returned to Lynbrook each evening after working until the library closed. Richard would meet him at the train to pour out his latest troubles. One night Whittaker remained late in New York, and when he reached the Lynbrook train station, his brother was not there.

Richard had apparently waited briefly, then driven to a nearby wharf from which "he could look in the direction of the place his wife was staying." He then left and returned to the Rockville Center apartment, drank a quart of whiskey, turned on the gas stove, and stuck his head in the oven. "I heard the telephone ring the next morning," Whittaker remembered, "and then a frightful scream from my mother. I knew what had happened. We went over right away. . . . We took the body back home to Lynbrook. Both my parents were prostrated so the funeral arrangements were left to me."<sup>65</sup>

Richard's suicide proved to be the most painful and enduring emotional event of Whittaker's life. He was guilt-stricken, possibly because of his absence the previous night or, more likely, because of his refusal to agree to the suicide pact Richard had proposed earlier, despite an obvious attraction to suicide as a solution to his own woes. Chambers remained inconsolable and immobilized in Lynbrook for two months.

Apparently Richard had discussed the suicide pact again with Whittaker shortly before his final—and successful—attempt on his life, since Chambers wrote a poem the day before his brother's death which he titled simply "Sept. 8, 1926":

*The moving masses of cloud, and the standing  
Freights on the siding in the sun,  
Alike induce in us that despair,  
Which we, brother, know there is no withstanding . . .*

*. . . And you know, brother, it is the same with cessation;  
You know how perfect must be*

*The moves of anything  
Designing its return to cessation.*

*You know it is the perfection of the motion in me I am waiting,  
Not lack of love, or love of the motion of beings  
Or things, or the sun's generation, that keeps me,  
But my perfection for death I am waiting.\**

By early November, Whittaker's grief began to subside, and his thoughts turned increasingly (almost as consolation) to the prospect of rededicating his life to Communism. But, as Chambers revealed in a letter he sent to Meyer Schapiro, who was then studying abroad, the idea of suicide stayed with him.<sup>66</sup>

Sam Krieger recalled Chambers speaking incessantly about his brother's death once he resumed contacts with Communist friends late in 1926: "The only thing that kept him going was that he was now a member of the Communist Party, and . . . otherwise he didn't know what he'd have to live for." Chambers also remembered that friends in the CP like Harry Freeman or Sender Garlin, "who were then working on *The Daily Worker*, to get me out of my mood . . . urged me to go with them on that paper," and although he did begin writing news articles for the *Worker*, Whittaker had by no means settled his future course.

He haunted his brother's Rockville Center home and Lynbrook gravesite in free moments, tramped the Long Island coastal countryside, and thought constantly about death:

Well, I will go on [he wrote Schapiro in mid-December]. There are still a hundred ways of living: I will go to sea perhaps, or I will drop underground where no one knows me, or I will go to South America or I will stay here and develop with the working class movement, or I must finally make a name as a writer. In the evening I smile at all that, and know that little of it is me . . . the death seems infinitely near: there is no soul and there is no eternity. . . . I really do not expect to take my own life within this month or this year (tho, of course, the horrible thought comes up: this is his year, and if you can postpone it now you never can die so near him again) but I am so organically indifferent that there is real doubt.<sup>67</sup>

Chambers had begun reading extensively again, mainly in the literature of revolutionary social theory, with Schapiro sending him a number of books unavailable to him in the United States.

\* When Chambers published this poem in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry*, he changed the title to "October 21, 1926," a month and a half after Richard's death, and he also altered the final stanza significantly:

*You know it is the cessation of the motion in me I am waiting:  
And not lack of love, or love of the sun's generation, and the motion  
Of bodies, or their stasis, that keeps me—but my perfection for death I am waiting.*

Late in 1926 Whittaker apparently moved from Lynbrook into Gertrude Hutchinson's Whitestone home. But there are signs that Chambers's relationship with Hutchinson had become cooler than his emotional involvement with Lewis (Bub) Green, who shared a love of camping, canoeing, and the outdoors. Gradually he supplanted his older brother James as Chambers's intimate. There were stark family resemblances between Bub's family situation and Whittaker's. Lewis Green later recalled that he and Whittaker became "particularly close friends after Chambers's brother committed suicide and [my] mother died in about 1924 [actually 1926]."<sup>68</sup>

Whittaker, in short, became drawn increasingly to Bub at the very moment he felt most guilty over Richard's suicide. But in the years that followed, however far their relationship may have extended, Chambers exhibited toward Green more than an older brother's normal protectiveness. The two men were together constantly for the next year or two, not only on their camping trips and horseback-riding Sundays but also in the company of Whittaker's Communist friends, whom Bub met on excursions to *The Daily Worker* (which Chambers began to help edit in 1927) and elsewhere. Several of Whittaker's friends in radical circles, also in their twenties, shared his enthusiasm for the outdoors, and both Green and Chambers later recalled running into many of them while camping out near Atlantic Beach. There Green met Sender Garlin and Mike Intrator, another of Whittaker's CP friends, while Chambers said that nearby tents were occupied by his friend and Party member Jack Rush (whose sister, Pauline, had married Clifton Fadiman) and by two young radical artists, a writer named Grace Lumpkin and her painter friend Esther Shemitz.

But Green's home deteriorated during the period he spent with Chambers; his father remarried, "got mixed in embezzlement, . . . and he completely disappeared." This led to Lewis's unhappy six months as a plumber's apprentice, after which he entered, first, CCNY (in 1927) and, a year later, NYU, where Chambers helped pay his tuition for one semester "with the proceeds from one of my translations." Although Chambers considered his ties with Bub best described as a "father-and-son relationship," he admitted later that the "homosexual aspect of this relationship was secret to both of us for years, but apparently not a secret to others. It was first brought to my attention during . . . a drunken party . . . probably in 1927 at the apartment of [name omitted]. At that time, I overheard [name omitted] remark . . . that there was a homosexual relationship between [Bub] and myself. This statement horrified me."<sup>69</sup>

Sometime in 1927 Green moved in with Chambers and Gertrude Hutchinson in her small Whitestone, Long Island, house. Both Green and Chambers later confirmed that Mrs. Hutchinson had sexual relations with both men. Chambers apparently told his next lover, Ida Dales, that he had initiated the communal sex, "feeling that Green needed" such experience,

but that “eventually it became a rather intolerable and tense situation” and Chambers “had insisted upon breaking [it] up. . . .”<sup>70</sup>

Whittaker’s long association with Gertrude Hutchinson ended abruptly in 1929 when a mutual friend introduced him to another young Communist activist named Ida Dales, with whom he soon set up housekeeping in an East Rockaway apartment. Lewis Green also broke with Mrs. Hutchinson at about that time, and he married the following year. Ida Dales may have played a role in disrupting Bub’s friendship with Whittaker: Green recalled “that he had very little to do with Ida . . . because he did not like her, considering her a very unattractive woman and a rude individual.”<sup>71\*</sup>

The years that followed Richard’s death proved remarkably productive for Whittaker, both as a journalist and as a translator. His assignments on *The Daily Worker* became increasingly important ones until by 1929 he had become News Editor, teaching journalism courses at the CP’s “Workers School.” He also expressed his devotion to Communism in a series of revolutionary poems, but his literary talents found more lasting expression (although Chambers would not have thought so at the time) in eight books that he translated from the French and German, published between 1928 and 1932. The best known and most popular of these, his translation of Felix Salten’s children’s classic, *Bambi*, its first version in English, appeared in 1928. Clifton Fadiman, who worked for the publishing house of Simon and Schuster at the time, helped arrange several of Chambers’s translating jobs, among them novels by the important German writers Heinrich Mann and Franz Werfel.<sup>72</sup>

But Whittaker accepted the translation commissions primarily to supplement the small salary he received from the *Worker*. Although he maintained ties with Fadiman and other Columbia friends, Chambers denigrated their efforts to build lives and careers outside of the Communist Party:

Dear Meyer, the young men of our generation are going to pieces in America [Chambers wrote Schapiro in 1927]; perhaps it is well that you escape to Egypt; yet why do you? Those who have no minds or character, only fads & education & inclination sail off to Europe every summer. . . . And I? What do I do? More & more, too long to tell. . . . Your generation is falling to pieces. In the last 3 or 4 months there have been from 10–19 suicides; all youths, school-boys & girls. Commenting on it in the *New Masses*, Mike Gold wrote: “There are only two positive philosophies in the U.S. today—the philosophy of Capitalist Imperialism & the philosophy of the Communists; and the younger generation has been

\* Later Green and his wife saw a great deal of Chambers in 1931 after he married Esther Shemitz, but his earlier intimacy with Whittaker was never restored. “He . . . at first found Esther Shemitz friendly although later she appeared to be antagonistic toward him, possibly because she felt that Chambers was too fond of him.” Although the two men corresponded and saw one another occasionally during the 1930s, their contacts tapered off after Chambers joined the Communist underground.

taught to scoff at both." Of course it goes deeper than that, but there is a germ of truth there.<sup>73</sup>

Whatever meaning Chambers extracted from his life at this point—apart from his relationships with Gertrude Hutchinson, Lewis Green, and (later) Ida Dales—came entirely from life on the *Worker* and from his ponderous poems, such as "March for the Red Dead" published in the *Worker* on May 23, 1927 ("For the dead, the dead, the dead, we march, comrades, workers"), or an equally self-conscious "proletarian" anthem, "Before the End," that appeared in the July 9, 1927, issue of *News Magazine Supplement* ("Before the end, Comrade, before the end/ How many of us alive today will stand/ Helpless to press a sentenced comrade's hand/ Knowing we look our last upon a friend,/ Comrades, before the end?").

"I have gone quite over [to] the revolutionary movement," Chambers wrote Schapiro in April 1927 about his devotion to Communism. "This was inevitable, and it is even surprising that the process took so long." He dreamed about a future role of importance within the CP:

If I cannot be a leader of one kind or another, I shall certainly belie my qualifications, be less useful than I should, a failure, in fact. . . . I am what is, in the Party, called a *literate*, and the *literate*s, willy-nilly struggle as they may against it, make up a leading van, just as the Party as a whole leads the van of the labor movement; leads when it properly functions.

That same month the Public Library fired its leading Communist "literate" as a book thief. An inspection of his locker on April 13 turned up eight NYPL books, and in a subsequent search of his Lynbrook home, inspectors found fifty-six books he had stolen years earlier from Columbia. "I have lost my job in the Library," Chambers wrote Schapiro several weeks later;

locker raided: radical books & handbills discovered. And, what is worse, books smuggled from other departments. Hence a *technical* charge based on *character* & discharge. But nothing *criminal* could be charged. So I have been barred from the Library, may not use it, a real misfortune. . . . For me [however] the loss is not so serious. I had arranged with Kip to leave the Library in September & enter an automobile training school, to learn mechanics. The break, says Kip, came only 2 months too soon.<sup>74</sup>

But Chambers never pursued this technical training. Instead he began full-time activity at *The Daily Worker* and accepted the first of his translating assignments, with Fadiman's help. The books he stole from Columbia, when returned, led Whittaker's old nemesis, Dean Hawkes, to inscribe on Chambers's college transcript on April 25: "Should not be allowed to register in any part of the university," an injunction that would only have amused the young "revolutionary" had he known about it. Chambers spent the next two years concerned mainly with translations,

writing for the *Worker*, and a deteriorating relationship with Gertrude Hutchinson.

The stock-market collapse made 1929 a decidedly unhappy year for many Americans. But for Chambers the signs were somewhat more mixed. The *ménage à trois* in Whitestone broke down, and there ensued a two-year disruption of his membership in the Communist Party. The deaths of his father and grandmother that year left only the more sympathetic Laha surviving of Whittaker's troubled Lynbrook family. At the same time, Whittaker began the happier phase of a two-year love affair with Ida Dales.

Since 1927 Chambers had "sat in the workers' councils" as an important staff member of *The Daily Worker*. Despite his recollection that its chief editor, Robert Minor, was "constantly out of his office and the job of running the 'Daily Worker' . . . [was] left to me," this description seems an exaggeration. Communist journalists who worked on the paper at the time recalled Whittaker, whose writing they admired, as a copy editor and specialist in rewriting stories and "workers' correspondence." Whatever his true role on the paper, Chambers ended it, leaving the *Worker*—and the CP—sometime in 1929 during a battle between the Party's then dominant leadership group, led by Jay Lovestone and Benjamin Gitlow, and an insurgent wing that included William Z. Foster and Earl Browder. The rebels, although comprising only a minority of the membership, took over the Party's leadership through the support of Soviet Party chiefs. Chambers had not been closely identified with the "Lovestoneites," but after expulsion of Lovestone and his followers in 1929 he found himself under attack (especially by a brother-in-law of Browder's also on the *Worker*). He drifted away from the paper and the Party in disgust that same year.<sup>75</sup>

Before leaving the *Worker*, Chambers had met Ida Dales, then twenty-eight like himself and employed in a Communist organization as a stenographer. Their affair began sometime that summer, and the couple moved in September 1929 into an East Rockaway apartment. Dales would recall "that she had intended to marry him and she believed that was his intention also. . . . Their relationship lasted for about one and one half years." The month after they met, Jay Sr. died of chronic hepatitis. Whittaker's father had been a heavy drinker since 1926; Richard's death had apparently destroyed his remaining interest in life. Grandmother Whittaker had been placed in a mental institution earlier that year, where she soon died, so that Jay's death left Laha alone in the Lynbrook house.

At Laha's invitation, Whittaker and Ida moved into the home with her in November and remained there for "three or four months." The two women apparently fought a great deal, or so Chambers told his friends Jacob and Esther Burck. Then Ida became pregnant. She and Chambers moved out, "taking an apartment on East 12th Street, New York City [where] she submitted to an abortion." Afterward Chambers and Dales

returned to East Rockaway, where they remained until the relationship ended—at Whittaker's insistence—"in late 1930 or early 1931." Chambers told the Burcks at this time that he had broken with Ida Dales because she couldn't get along with his mother and because she didn't wish to have a child. He said nothing about the abortion. "No need was so strong in me as the need to have children," Chambers later wrote of this year in his life.<sup>76</sup>

Sometime in 1930 Chambers began seeing Esther Shemitz, who quickly supplanted Ida Dales in his affections. "I told Ida . . . of this fact and we then parted." (Chambers may already have been living with Esther at that time.) Ida later described Whittaker as "a truthful person but a rather strange personality. She thought of him as a romantic person, highly emotional, and unrealistic, [and] during the period she lived with Chambers she had thought that he had some tendency toward homosexuality." Apparently Chambers told Dales the entire story of his Whitestone years with Green and Hutchinson prior to meeting her.<sup>77</sup>

His two years of formal separation from the Communist Party proved neither unhappy nor wrenching ones for Chambers, both because of his active love life and because of his ability to maintain ties with many Communist friends. One of them, Mike Intrator, a supporter of Lovestone, had been expelled in 1929, and Chambers spent a great deal of time with him during this period. Other intimates, such as Jacob and Esther Burck, remained sympathetic and receptive to Whittaker despite his alienation from the CP's new leadership. Burck then worked as a cartoonist for *The New Masses*, and he maintained a studio apartment on 14th Street, where he sculpted and painted. Chambers spent many evenings with the Burcks during his years of ostracism, often showing up at mealtime, and regularly proclaiming his devotion to Communism although as a member of the unrecognized "loyal opposition." Whittaker also began writing short stories sometime in 1930, and Burck served as intermediary with Walt Carmon, editor of *The New Masses*, to arrange their publication, a circumstance that led directly to Chambers's return to the Communist Party.<sup>78</sup>

Initially some Communists on *The New Masses*, including the cartoonist William Gropper, protested Carmon's decision to publish the work of a "Lovestoneite renegade" (the magazine was ostensibly an independent radical organ at the time, although dominated by Communist writers). But Carmon printed the four stories submitted by Chambers in 1931: "The titles of these stories were 'Can You Make Out Their Voices?,' 'The Death of the Communists,' 'You Have Seen the Heads,' [and] 'Our Comrade Munn.' The themes . . . [Chambers recalled] were the situation among the poor farmers in the middle west, the struggle of the Chinese Communist, how a Communist organizer should conduct himself, and a kind of religious appraisal of what a devoted Communist should be."

The four stories attracted considerable attention among American radicals. International Publishers, the official Communist publishing house,

issued "Can You Make Out Their Voices?" in pamphlet form, and it was soon translated into a number of languages. Hallie Flanagan, then the head of Vassar's Playwriting Laboratory, turned the story into a play, which radical theater groups around the world performed regularly during the 1930s. Another of the stories, "Our Comrade Munn," also was translated, dramatized, and widely produced.

More important to Chambers's future in the CP, however, was the reaction of a leading Soviet critic in the Moscow publication *International Literature*, who rhapsodized about "Can You Make Out Their Voices?": "It gives a revolutionary exposition of the problem of the agricultural crisis and correctly raises the question of the leading role of the Communist Party in the revolutionary farmers' movement. . . . For the first time [in American writing], it raises the image of the Bolshevik."

Before year's end, Chambers had made his peace with Communist Party officials, meeting first with Alexander Trachtenberg—the Party's leading cultural "commissar"—and with an even more important (if mysterious) figure, Charles Dirba, head of the CP's Central Control Commission, which screened members for ideological deviations. Because of the popularity his short stories enjoyed among Party members, and considering Chambers's evident talent as a writer, Dirba apparently forgave Whittaker's past indiscretions and approved his selection as an editor of *The New Masses*. The magazine's July 1931 issue announced his new status and contained a somewhat embroidered and distorted biography alongside a picture of Chambers.<sup>79\*</sup>

Both footloose bachelors at the time, Whittaker and Mike Intrator struck up friendships with Esther Shemitz and Grace Lumpkin, who shared a small house in Greenwich Village where Grace wrote her novels and Esther painted. The two women had become friends a few years earlier while they worked for a Quaker magazine called *The World Tomorrow*. Both participated in a number of Communist-sponsored causes during the late Twenties and early Thirties, although neither joined the CP. *The World Tomorrow* had a pacifist and mildly socialist orientation. Among the magazine's editors were two women who would soon become leading Communists, Grace Hutchins and Anna Rochester, and who became friendly with Esther Shemitz. With Rochester's help, Esther obtained a job with the Soviet government-affiliated Amtorg Trading Company, where she worked for three years after leaving the pacifist magazine. While at Amtorg, Esther joined the John Reed Club, participated in Communist rallies, and became involved in a 1930 Passaic strike demonstration, where she remembered being "beaten up during an ensuing riot."<sup>80</sup>

It was "at, or after this demonstration," Esther thought, that she initially

\* At about the same time Chambers joined a local branch of the Communist-dominated John Reed Club of radical writers and artists.

encountered Whittaker Chambers. But Shemitz and Lumpkin, whose 1932 novel, *To Make My Bread*, made her famous among radicals, may have met Chambers and Intrator earlier on an Atlantic Beach outing. They became a foursome in 1930. Esther and Whittaker married on April 15, 1931, and Lumpkin and Intrator were wed the same year.

The two couples shared cramped quarters in the women's 11th Street house for several months until the *ménage à quatre* began to attract criticism from friends. Some of these suspected that both Whittaker and Mike Intrator had been homosexuals prior to their marriages. "You are all living in a sea of shit," Jacob Burck told Chambers at this time, to which Whittaker responded laconically: "You, too." Whether because of tensions inherent in living at such close quarters or because of their friends' disapproval, Whittaker and Esther moved early in 1932 to a farmhouse at Glen Gardner, New Jersey, owned by a friend named Franklin Spier. Chambers commuted into Manhattan to work at *The New Masses*. But he remained at the magazine only a few months longer. At that point he received and accepted an invitation to join the Communist underground.<sup>81</sup>

Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss had at least one thing in common in 1932 that distinguished them from millions of Americans: they were both working. At times that fact apparently discomfited the Hisses, as when a friend of Alger's remarked how pleasant the day seemed, only to have Priscilla snap back that it might be a nice day for people with homes and servants, but it wasn't a very nice day for the sharecroppers in Oklahoma! "Priscilla denies that she would ever have said such a thing," according to a Hiss biographer, "and Alger doesn't remember being present at the time, but he says it would have been perfectly in character for her, and in those days he might have said the same thing."<sup>82</sup>

Satisfactorily married and with a promising career in corporate law ahead of him, Hiss apparently assuaged uneasiness over the Depression's suffering by devoting many of his free hours to the International Juridical Association. His wife found sufficient time—apart from caring for Timothy and researching the fine-arts book—to immerse herself more deeply than Alger in the organizational network of New York radicalism, both of the traditional Socialist and the innovative American Labor Associates varieties. Whittaker Chambers's commitment to revolutionary socialism went deeper still, especially after seven years of close and turbulent association with the Communist movement. Esther Shemitz Chambers, although content to remain detached from her husband's CP work, also remained a quietly faithful, if somewhat non-denominational, radical, with Socialist, pacifist, and Communist elements mingled in her background.

All four young people (Esther was senior at thirty-two) shared with millions of their generation a yearning to transcend mere personal or pro-

fessional fulfillment, whether in families or careers, for more active roles as reformers in the rapid transformation of American society.

To radicals especially, 1932 seemed both a terminal year and a turning point in their dreams. Millions were jobless and undernourished. A Bonus Army of World War I veterans had been dispersed by federal troops in Washington. The country's capitalists had proved impotent in the face of continued economic collapse. The Hoover Administration lived out its final months despised by America's impoverished majority and incapable of providing relief for the needy. Old authorities crumbled, and widespread social despair encouraged the belief—at least among the more militant—that no amount of piecemeal change could restore the nation's battered economic structure and the bruised morale of its people.

It seemed to some a moment for revolutionaries impatient to serve, if not themselves, then "the sharecroppers of Oklahoma" and similarly desperate Americans. "Ah, what an age it is / When to speak of trees is almost a crime / For it is a kind of silence about injustice," ran Brecht's verses about this era. "You, who shall emerge from the flood / In which we are sinking, Think— / When you speak of our weaknesses, / Also of the dark time / That brought them forth."<sup>83</sup> The following year, in that dark time, Alger Hiss joined the New Deal and Whittaker Chambers entered the Communist underground.