

III

THE UN-SECRET AGENT

A New Life

When he disappeared to become a member of the Communist underground in the spring of 1932, Whittaker Chambers and his bride were still living in the New Jersey farmhouse. Glen Gardner was two hours' commuting time from New York and Chambers's work at the *New Masses* editorial post. Before dropping out of sight, he and Esther had remodeled a barn on the farm property, where they lived during the transition period between Whittaker's brief tenure as a recusant "open Party" *New Masses* editor and his recruitment for secret work. Esther Shemitz's quiet demeanor contrasted comfortably with the flamboyant and energetic excesses toward which Chambers tended at moments of crisis. The couple settled into easy domesticity, and in the years that followed—despite their frequent changes in residence while Whittaker served in the underground—Esther managed to create a peaceful and stable family environment, one for which Chambers yearned if only to counterbalance the violent, unhappy memories of the Lynbrook maelstrom.¹

Late in the spring of 1932 Chambers received a phone call from someone he had never met, Max Bedacht, head of the International Workers Order, an important Party affiliate, and a member of the American Communist Central Committee. Bedacht summoned Chambers to his office and announced that he had been "co-opted" for secret work with a "peculiar institution" of the Party—"I remember the expression 'peculiar institution,' because it has a [special] meaning in American history"—and he gave Chambers a day to think it over. Understandably, Esther "strongly opposed" the change. But the next morning, according to Chambers's FBI deposition, when he reported his refusal to Bedacht, "he told me that I had no choice."²

The new post required that Chambers separate himself from *The New Masses* and disappear from "open" Communist circles. Before the recruit could object further, Bedacht led him away from CP headquarters into the nearby 14th Street subway station, where they met a friend of Chambers's from *Daily Worker* days, John Loomis Sherman, who also had been expelled in 1929 as a Lovestoneite. Chambers recalled that at their last meeting after

the expulsion he had tried to comfort Sherman, who "sat down at his typewriter and cried." Yet Chambers felt somehow that "it was perhaps John Sherman who suggested me for underground activity."

Later that day Sherman introduced Chambers to a Russian named "Herbert," who questioned him closely about his earlier separation from the Party and his subsequent views on doctrinal questions. ("Herbert" was later identified as Valentin Markin, a relative of the Soviet leader V. M. Molotov; Markin died in New York in 1934 under still unsettled circumstances.) In the days that followed, Chambers met another Russian named "Ulrich," a man "who thereafter became my superior. And it was he who explained to me my function," which at the time involved acting as liaison between the American Communist Party underground and the Russian espionage network in New York.³

Several factors made Whittaker Chambers an attractive prospect for such secret work. First, he was a well-educated and highly literate native American CP member at a time when foreign-born immigrant workers still comprised the bulk of Party membership. Chambers could mingle easily with all classes of Americans outside the Party. Moreover, his superior intelligence, despite a weakness for self-dramatization, apparently commended him to his Russian underground superiors such as Herbert and Ulrich far more than to the prosaic and doctrinaire American functionaries. By this time the Russians had the final say on all such matters within American Communism.

His separation from the CP between 1929 and 1931, despite its consolations, had shaken Chambers: "I was determined that I would never again leave the Communist Party no matter what I thought, but would simply accept discipline and go along whether I believed in it or not." But this "good soldier" explanation subsequently adopted by Chambers obscures a large portion of the truth, or so the evidence suggests: namely, that he welcomed and relished the new assignment as an opportunity to demonstrate his talents while serving as a front-line "soldier of the revolution." His friend Jacob Burck described Chambers recently as a "writer who preferred to live his novels rather than to write them," and in the years that followed, Whittaker Chambers became probably the most un-secret agent in the annals of American espionage, a spy (in Burck's phrase) "who basked in the cold."⁴

In July 1932 Chambers left his *New Masses* office for the last time to begin a six-year career as an underground courier. He used the alias "Karl" most frequently during these years, although his contacts also knew the husky, intense young man under a variety of other pseudonyms. Ella Winter, then the wife of journalist Lincoln Steffens and a friend of many left-wing notables, met Chambers in 1933 as "Harold Phillips," while the literary agent Maxim Lieber, who also knew Chambers's true identity, worked with him for a time on an underground project as "Lloyd Cantwell."⁵

Others who circulated around the periphery of American Communism during the Depression decade recognized the brown-haired agent as "David Breen," "Arthur Dwyer," "Bob," and still other aliases.

The furtive life of a secret CP functionary must have excited Chambers at the beginning, especially when contrasted with the mundane writing and editing chores at *The New Masses*. Along with other Communists, Chambers considered the goal of a "Soviet America" within reach in the foreseeable future. Fifteen million Americans were unemployed and many thousands wandered the highways, train tracks, and countryside in search of food, shelter, work, and purpose. Although most Americans remained firmly committed to providing reform and relief through the normal processes of government, a million of them broke political ranks in 1932 to vote for either the Socialist presidential candidate, Norman Thomas, or the Communist nominee, William Z. Foster. In such times one radical writer's ability to regard his "secret work" as important and constructive seems more comprehensible.

Our Man in Manhattan

Few among Chambers's older New York friends and associates, either from Columbia days or among "open" Communists, remained in the dark. Many individuals from all parts of the American Left—Communists, Lovestoneites, Trotskyists, and Socialists—were soon "witting" to the nature of Chambers's new role in the underground. Since most of "Karl's" assignments until mid-1933 were in the New York City area, Chambers frequently had opportunity to dramatize his new vocation with elaborate displays of non-recognition whenever he chanced upon friends or acquaintances in public places. One leading Communist official indicated this awareness when he told a New York journalist recently that "we all knew Chambers' picture was turned to the wall, but with honor." Ella Winter remembered one of these occasions. While walking along a Manhattan street with a friend during the mid-Thirties, Chambers, who had previously tried—and failed—to recruit her for the underground using the name "Harold Phillips," suddenly came into view. "Don't take any notice of that man," her friend, a leading film distributor, quickly cautioned her. "That was Whittaker Chambers, who is doing secret work for the Party."⁶

During his six years as an agent Chambers successfully led several lives, each detached from the others. First, his normal one within the CP's espionage network. Second, a family life with Esther and two children. Third, a series of detours into brief homosexual encounters. And, fourth, his secretive efforts to maintain close links with non-Communist friends outside the Party's orbit. Chambers managed to juggle these conflicting lives

without noticeable damage to his primary roles as a husband, father, and Communist agent.

Throughout the period, he tried to maintain close and regular contacts with friends whose political loyalties brought them into opposition to the Stalinist-dominated CPUSA. Chambers often removed himself momentarily from his responsibilities as a Party courier to visit people such as Meyer and Lillian Schapiro, Robert Cantwell, Herbert Solow, and Mike Intrator, all of whom knew generally about the nature of his work for the CP without being privy to the details.* Chambers "took breathers" from his espionage assignments in short, much as he had fled prosaic literary editing for the underground. When the Moscow purges went public in 1936, these extra-Party associations would prove costly to him, but in the early years there seemed no harm in the practice. Often Chambers described the work proudly to these friends, persons whose company also provided the chance to discuss literary or artistic interests unrelated to CP work or Party slogans.⁷ But if he relished his newly acquired notoriety among old friends, in the process he recklessly cast off the normal degree of cover necessary for effective spying. Thus Herbert Solow described Chambers's behavior:

During my absence in Europe [in 1932], Chambers had left the *New Masses*. On my return he told me he was back in the Party but that he was engaged in special work of a confidential nature. Later he told me he was a member of the Russian, not of the American CP. . . . One day he asked me to lend him \$400 because, he said, funds had been delayed. He repaid me at the appointed time, a few days or a week. Another time he told me to take his key and enter his apartment before him, as he thought enemies might be there. I did so, thinking the business rather silly. I questioned him at this time and he told me that he was engaged in counterespionage for the Soviets against the Japanese.

Chambers also told Mike Intrator and Grace Lumpkin about his new assignment, shortly after becoming an underground Communist. He appeared so proud of the role, in fact, that Meyer Schapiro remembered Chambers visiting old Columbia friends far more frequently than during the late Twenties: "He had found valuable work and had regained a sense of dignity."⁸

This disdain for normal security precautions when communicating with his New York circle reached a high point when during a short stay in Moscow (the precise length of the trip remains unknown) Chambers sent postcards to friends in the United States in April 1933, including Jacob Burck and Meyer Schapiro. Whittaker and Esther Chambers traveled to the Soviet Union, using fraudulent passports, presumably so that he could train as an agent at the Lenin School or receive extensive briefing

* Chambers told Franklin Spier that he was doing "highly secretive work," but refused to disclose any details of the work since he did not want his friends involved, according to Spier. FBI Interview #3059, March 14, 1949.

by the Soviet Military Intelligence (Fourth Branch) officials to whom Chambers had been assigned shortly after joining the underground.* Chambers could not resist writing to the Schapiros in order to congratulate them upon the birth of their child, and one of the two postcards sent (both bearing postmark cancellations from the Soviet Union) reads: "4/22/33 Moscow. Esther and I send our best to the new baby. A Soviet blessing on it. [signed] David [one of Chambers's middle names] and Esther." This card was in Esther's handwriting, while the second one, written by Whittaker, had a picture on its front of Maxim Gorky holding two children and read: "Best wishes to all three of you. Whit." Jacob Burck remembers receiving a card from Chambers in Moscow about the same time, but did not save his.⁹

For the remainder of his life Chambers never admitted having been in the Soviet Union. Occasionally he even feigned ignorance of Russian, a language in which he was fluent. And Mrs. Chambers still disavows any knowledge of their mission to Moscow. Further confirmation of the trip, however, comes from Robert Cantwell, Chambers's friend, who was then on *The New Republic's* book-review staff. In mid-1933 Chambers asked Cantwell if he could review a new book, *The White Armies of Russia*. The review appeared in the magazine's July 19, 1933, issue under the pseudonym "Hugh Jones." In the credit line Chambers described himself: "Hugh Jones is an engineer who recently returned from an extended visit to Russia."¹⁰

That "Hugh Jones" was really Whittaker Chambers was confirmed by Lincoln Steffens. Apparently Steffens had corresponded with Chambers in 1933 about preparing a biography of Edward B. Filene, the Boston department-store magnate, radical progressive, and Steffens's patron. Eventually, Robert Cantwell took the assignment and lived for a period with Steffens and Ella Winter in Carmel, California, though he never published the biography. But Steffens had written Chambers in June 1933 congratulating him on his short stories in *The New Masses*:

How you can write! And your stuff—Whenever I hear people talk about "proletarian art and literature," I'm going to ask them to shut their minds and look at you. I hope you are very young, though I don't see how you can be. I hope, too, that you are daring, that you have no respect for the writers of my generation and you know as I do that you can do it. Now I will put on my hat again.¹¹

* Felix Inslerman, a photographer who later worked with Chambers microfilming stolen documents, took a similar trip to Russia for training in espionage in 1935. After leaving the CP in 1938, Chambers wrote several articles about his work in helping to prepare faked passports for use by agents wishing to travel abroad secretly for Comintern meetings and other purposes. I found copies of the articles, which Chambers believed destroyed, in Herbert Solow's files. In 1940 the Communist Party leader in the United States, Earl Browder, was convicted of using such passports, known in the trade at the time as "boots."

Although already in the underground, Chambers contacted Steffens on Thanksgiving Day 1933 during a visit Steffens paid to New York City:

Whittaker Chambers called up this morning; said he heard I would like to see him and offered to call [Steffens wrote his son that evening]. I suggested lunch with me here. He had been cheered by a copy of my letter to him. Really appreciated it because nobody had ever before given him a hand. "Not the other left writers, not the other men on the Masses?" I ask—

He: Never a word. We don't do that for one another. I said that was a Red fault; there must be "warm spots." He agreed; he himself tries now to be a warm spot. But it is not the spirit of the Party. I said I got that at the Masses yesterday; they listened, but were unresponsive, and I thought, got or took nothing. "There you are known" he said. They told me they had a very impressive, suggestive talk from you and that's why I am here; because they were so impressed, especially North [Joseph North, a Communist writer and friend of Chambers]. . . .

In September 1934 Steffens wrote a long letter to Chambers, beginning "Dear Mr. Hugh Jones." Doubtless Robert Cantwell, at some point during his months with Steffens, described the "Hugh Jones" review and explained Chambers's present work and use of pseudonyms.

A number of those who came to know him as "Karl"—including Alger and Priscilla Hiss, according to Chambers—believed that he was either a German or a Russian because of the slight accent and foreign intonation that he affected, an easy partial disguise for a skilled linguist like Whittaker to adopt. "[Ludwig] Lore, [John] Abt and others who have met [him in the underground] think he is a Russian," Solow's notarized 1938 memo quotes Chambers as stating, "He once went to Lore's and met there a group including Alphonse Goldschmidt. The latter mistook him for somebody else and said, 'Why, Col. Dietrich, the last time I saw you, you were on the General Staff in Moscow.' He let the impression stick in that group." Chambers taught himself to write and speak several languages, including German, Russian, Spanish, and—according to his friends—more difficult ones such as Hungarian and Chinese. Julian Wadleigh, who later confessed to passing State Department documents to Chambers in 1937-8, described a dinner with "Karl" in a Washington Chinese restaurant when the latter read the entire menu aloud in what appeared to be Chinese.¹²

The Secret Life of Whittaker Chambers

Underground work or not, the Chamberses wanted a normal family life. The strains and tensions must have been profound for them both. Two children were born in these years, Ellen in 1933 and John in 1936. Esther understood clearly that her husband was performing secret, perhaps illegal tasks for the CP; her name was often changed to match his own aliases.

Thus, "David Breen's wife became Edna Breen," and, according to Whittaker and Esther, they presented themselves to Alger and Priscilla Hiss as "Carl" and "Liza." The Chambers family lived in many places during this period, and Esther made the best of her husband's irregular schedule. Often he was gone for days at a time, presumably on assignments about which he rarely confided.* While at home, Chambers was an attentive husband (according to Esther) and, as his letters at the time indicate, an evidently doting father.¹³

Not only did Chambers withhold from his wife detailed knowledge of his underground activities, but he also kept from her any awareness of his other secret life away from home, his intermittent homosexual encounters. Even when confessing these to the FBI in February 1949, fearing that defense lawyers would pounce on the issue at Alger Hiss's forthcoming perjury trial, Chambers did so reluctantly and with shame. But Chambers denied the many rumors circulating in 1949 about possible sexual relations between himself and Hiss:

This is completely untrue [he stated to the FBI]. At no time, did I have such relations, or even the thought of such relations with Hiss or with anybody else in the Communist Party or connected with Communist work of any kind. I kept my secret as jealously from my associates in the C.P. as I did from everyone else. I tell it now only because, in this case, I stand for truth. Having testified mercilessly against others, it has become my function to testify mercilessly against myself.¹⁴

When she was questioned by the FBI in 1949, his former mistress Ida Dales had no direct recollection of any homosexual activities on Whittaker's part. Nor did Grace Lumpkin or others. Apparently it was only after Chambers began underground work that his new *modus operandi* allowed him the means and opportunity to test in a more leisurely fashion the other side of his sexual nature. The story is told most fully in Chambers's 1949 statements to the FBI:

In 1933 or 4, a young fellow stopped me on the street in N.Y. and asked me if I could give him a meal and lodgings for the night. I fed him and he told me about his life as a miner's son. I was footloose, so I took him to a hotel to spend the night. During the course of our stay at the hotel that night I had my first homosexual experience. There he . . . taught me an experience I did not know existed. At the same time, he revealed to me, and unleashed, the . . . tendency of which I was still unaware. It was a revelation to me. As a matter of fact it set off a chain reaction in me which was almost impossible to control. Because it had been repressed so long, it was all the more violent when once set free.

* Esther Chambers insisted during the Hiss trials that she had never realized Whittaker was engaged in espionage work.

I do not know the identity of the young man I spoke of, nor does he know my true identity. I have never seen him since the first night I met him. For three or four years, I fought a wavering battle against this affliction. Since that time [in 1933 or 1934], and continuing up to the year 1938, I engaged in numerous homosexual activities both in New York and Washington, D.C. At first I would engage in these activities whenever by accident the opportunity presented itself. However, after a while the desire became greater and I actively sought out the opportunities for homosexual relationships. I recall that incidents of this nature took place in the Hotel Annapolis and the Hotel Pennsylvania in Washington, D.C. I registered in these hotels under assumed names which I cannot now recall. I know that other incidents took place in hotels in New York City which I cannot now remember, but concerning which I might state that they were the typical "flea bag" type of hotel one finds in certain parts of Manhattan. I never had any prolonged affair with any one man and never visited any known places where these type of people were known to congregate. I generally went to parks and other parts of town where these people were likely to be found.

I am positive that no man with whom I had these relations during this period ever knew my true identity, nor do I at this time recall the names of any of them.¹⁵

When he left the Communist Party in 1938, according to Chambers, he "managed to break myself of my homosexual tendencies and since that time I have been a model husband and father." He described his homosexuality as his "darkest personal secret," one that he had never divulged either to his family or to friends, "particularly those in the Communist Party." Nor had he even mentioned the subject previously to his wife or attorneys, he told the FBI, raising it "for the first time to anyone today [because] . . . in all probability this subject matter will be brought to light [during the Hiss trial]." How had he managed to cease homosexual activities in 1938? "With God's help," he said, after "embracing, for the first time, religion."

But Chambers's memory may have tricked him on this point. Although he defected from the Communist underground in 1938, his formal affiliation with Episcopalianism came several years later and his 1937-9 letters do not indicate interest in religion. The implication remains clear: that Chambers persisted in forming casual homosexual attachments after he broke with Communism when (even though in hiding) he made a number of brief, sometimes puzzling trips to New York City, ostensibly in connection with efforts to obtain money and translating jobs. It is possible that only after he began work at *Time* in April 1939 and either formed or renewed close (but non-sexual) friendships with several of his religiously minded colleagues, men such as Samuel Welles and Robert Cantwell, did Chambers finally break all ties with his only remaining underground activity, that restless "cruising" of city streets for male partners which had both attracted and tormented him during the 1930s.¹⁶

Ulrich and His Circle: The World of Soviet Intelligence

No evidence has emerged to contradict Chambers's assertion that he never mixed the Communist Party's secret work with his private homosexual encounters. Long periods away from home gave him time enough for both, although during the early months after joining the underground he maintained a crowded schedule spent learning the personnel and practices of his new associates. The Sherman-"Herbert" spy network appears crude and haphazard when contrasted with the CP's far more extensive—and more professional—secret operations in Washington during the New Deal years and the Second World War. In the 1932-4 period there was a good deal of bustling about Manhattan to conspiratorial meetings using passwords and the other paraphernalia of an espionage operation—but little in the way of results, as the Russians later acknowledged when they recalled, first, "Herbert" and, later, his successor, Alexander Petrovich Ulanovski ("Ulrich"). Herbert and Ulrich did not get along. Although Herbert was an ordinary Bolshevik bureaucrat seconded for some reason to the *apparat*, Ulrich had led a complex life, common among Soviet espionage agents at the time. Many had begun their secret work during the early 1920s when the Bolsheviks treated new, ideologically suspect recruits from Menshevik or Social Revolutionary ranks more tolerantly. Many Russian underground workers abroad had developed loyalties not to Stalin, but to other Bolshevik leaders such as Trotsky, Bukharin, or Zinoviev, those who had lost out in the power struggle.

Some thought they had managed to detach themselves from the fratricidal battles within the Soviet leadership. Ulrich, as Chambers remembered him, fitted this latter description. He described the Russian to the FBI in 1949 as well-read and someone who detested Stalin, claiming to have been in Siberian prisons with him prior to the Revolution:

Ulrich was rather skeptical in his opinions of the Communist Party and in his activities, in that he did not always believe in the infallibility of the Party. He had been a Partisan leader in the Crimea and Southern Russia during the Civil War and [later] . . . had done underground work in the Argentine and also in China during the "Borodine days."^{*17}

When first introducing him to Ulrich, John Sherman informed Chambers that the latter would be his superior and that Sherman—who then moved to the West Coast to recruit other underground volunteers—would no longer maintain contact. Ulrich's agents met regularly at a brownstone house in the West Fifties known to group members as "the Gallery." The apartment's owner remained unknown to Chambers since there was no

* The reference is to Michael Borodin, an important Bolshevik representative to the Chinese Nationalist government—and to the Chinese Communist Party—during the 1920s.

name on the doorbell, nor did he meet anyone there except for the Russians Herbert and Ulrich.

During these months of apprenticeship Chambers did little more for the group than to pass messages back and forth between the Russians and Max Bedacht concerning the movements of couriers. Chambers claimed to have had two meetings during this period also, through Ulrich, with a Finn named Arvid Jacobsen, who was later arrested and convicted in a major trial of Soviet agents in Finland during the 1930s. A few months after he joined Ulrich's group, Whittaker and Esther Chambers took their trip to the Soviet Union.

By the time they returned, the group had moved headquarters from "the Gallery" to an apartment on Gay Street in Greenwich Village:

The Gay Street apartment [Chambers later told the FBI] was used primarily during the time that I visited there, as the base of operations for a communications system between the underground in the United States and Europe. This consisted of a receipt in the United States of communications carried by couriers who were seamen and stewards attached to the various ships of the North German Lloyd SS Line and the Hamburg American Line, and the forwarding of communications to Germany [then only recently fallen under Nazi domination]. These incoming communications consisted of microfilm and letters containing secret writing. However, the material delivered in the United States to these couriers for transmission to Germany took the form of microfilm only.

There was an innocuous message—the same one—on each of the letters received, and members of Ulrich's ring would dissolve the paper in a chemical solution in order to make the underlying message appear. These messages and also those on the microfilm were in Russian and presumably were meant for Ulrich or Herbert.* Others joined the group to transmit messages between the German seamen and the American network, usually meeting in New York cafeterias or on Manhattan streets. This courier system aboard German ships operated throughout 1932 and 1933, according to Chambers, but was quickly broken up by the Gestapo, which, after Hitler's seizure of power, arrested a number of Communist seamen. Ulrich communicated for a time also with an American soldier in the Canal Zone, Corporal Robert Osman, who in 1933 confessed to providing plans of American installations in the Zone to Soviet agents.¹⁸

Few of the many operations engaged in by Chambers's underground unit proved particularly fruitful. Ulrich's orders from Red Army intelligence chiefs were to concentrate on industrial espionage—the theft of technical materials related to military production—but only a handful of the numerous attempts in which Chambers and his cohorts participated during the 1932-4 period turned up such documents. One scheme that did pan out, directed not by Ulrich but by J. Peters, involved contacts with CP

* A third Russian known only as "Charley" generally handled the exposure and enlarging of the microfilm.

sympathizers who worked for the Electric Boat Company of New London, Connecticut, the leading American manufacturer of submarines. A Communist employee there claimed that he could ferret away "any amount of blue prints on submarines and would do so if it was desired." Chambers had been taught by "Charley" to photograph documents by this time, and he took pictures of a first batch of material delivered by the New London contact only to discover that "none of the prints turned out." Thereafter an experienced photographer from the group went along on journeys to New London.

The scheme quickly fell apart when a company worker named Clayton B. Darrow confessed his role in it to the local American Legion chapter. In addition, Darrow spoke to FBI agents on May 2 and July 3, 1934. His account confirmed Chambers's story: "In 1932 Darrow was instructed . . . to remove a blue-print from the plant for photostating which he claimed he did. Darrow was later brought to NYC [to meet two] . . . individuals at a hotel in the neighborhood of 125th Street." Similar efforts by Chambers's network to obtain plans for American military equipment elsewhere in 1933 and 1934, usually from Communist sympathizers working at military installations, failed to produce much of value.¹⁹

Ulrich shifted operations again in late 1933, this time to an apartment in Brooklyn's Brownsville section owned by a member of the ring named Joshua Tamer. The Tamer apartment was the scene of an all-night party arranged by Ulrich that Chambers recalled vividly for the FBI in 1949. Although Chambers had a low tolerance for alcohol and, after defecting from the Party, became a teetotaler, on this occasion he and Ulrich both drank more than their share, with embarrassing results:

During the course of the evening Ulrich and [his wife] Elaine began questioning me as to my views on the Communist situation in Germany. I remember that I "damned" Stalin's policy in Germany and as a result incurred the displeasure of Elaine who advanced on me rather belligerently. As a result I pushed her lightly with my hand and she fell to the floor. By midnight everyone was out cold.

When I woke the next morning I thought that I had ruined myself as a Communist because of my denouncement of Stalin . . . and my actions toward Elaine. However, when Ulrich arose he patted me on the back and said, "You are all right, Bob" [Chambers's pseudonym at the time]. This action on his part gave me the impression that Ulrich's opinion also deviated somewhat from the Party line. Elaine, however, did not speak to me for some months thereafter.²⁰

For undetermined reasons, Ulrich and Elaine began disbanding their operations early in 1934 and transferring agents such as Chambers to the control of other underground leaders like Peters. Although Ulrich did not explain the move, Chambers believed that Ulrich's recall to the Soviet Union came as the result of bickering among Russian agents and the failure of Ulrich's efforts to infiltrate an army arsenal, one of the group's flawed projects. Elaine had recently given birth, and Dr. Philip Rosenbliett, an

underground associate, told Chambers that there had been some difficulty in obtaining the passport and visas needed to take the baby out of the country. "I remember that Ulrich's last words to me," Chambers informed the FBI in 1949, "were spoken in a semi-humorous slightly sinister manner, and were to the effect that 'Remember, Bob, you can be shot by them or you can be shot by us.'"

Until recently there existed only partial confirmation of Chambers's story of his years in Ulrich's network. FBI files corroborated his account of incidents such as the abortive espionage efforts at the Electric Boat Company in New London and elsewhere, but even the Bureau could produce no other member of his earliest network to confirm the basic account, something they did for the period after 1935 when Chambers shifted most of his secret work to the Baltimore-Washington area. But Ulrich's wife, "Elaine," whose real name is Nadezhda (Nadya) Ulanovskaya and who now lives in Israel, recently came forward. Chambers had heard about her once a number of years after he left the Party, and he recounted the incident to the FBI in 1949:

. . . about 1947 . . . "Time" magazine's Bureau Chief in Moscow, Mr. Craig Thompson, wrote a letter to a Foreign News writer at "Time," Mr. John Barkham. In this letter, Mr. Thompson sent greetings to me and added "Nadya also sends greetings." . . . When Mr. Thompson returned to New York sometime thereafter, I asked him who Nadya was and he told me she was a Russian woman employed in the Time Bureau to do part-time translations from Russian. The description he gave me of this woman and her husband convinced me that they were Ulrich and Elaine. Nadya had told Mr. Thompson that she knew me personally but did not go into details of underground work in the United States. Nadya's name in the Time Bureau was Ulanova. Lenin's real name was Ulanov. This I presume is what Elaine meant when she said that Ulrich was Lenin. . . . Thompson also told me that the Ulanovs had become bitterly anti-Soviet and lived in constant fear of being shot or sent to Siberia.²¹

At the time Chambers gave the FBI this deposition in 1949, the Ulanovs had already been arrested, convicted, and sent to a Siberian labor camp.

Nadya Ulanovskaya has confirmed the substance of Chambers's account of his underground activities from his recruitment up to the time when Ulrich and Elaine returned to Russia in early 1934. After reading Chambers's memoir and his deposition to the FBI, she commented:

All of it I find perfectly in order. . . . When I read his book I found in it some inaccuracies but they were of a minor character, obviously unintentional, such as addresses, dates, etc. I didn't in some cases agree with his judgment of people that we both knew. But all of that is irrelevant to the case. On the whole, the book is fairly accurate in that part of it which describes events of which I had a firsthand knowledge.

Scoffing at the dangers involved in conducting an espionage ring in the United States during the early 1930s, at a time when no effective American

counter-intelligence agency existed, Nadya said: "If you wore a sign saying 'I am a spy,' you might still not get arrested in America when we were there."²²

The Ulanovskis went on family picnics and swimming parties with Esther and Whittaker Chambers after the two couples became friends. Chambers would hold forth on his contempt for "bourgeois" culture, which irritated Nadya, who had quickly developed a fondness for the United States and its ordinary "bourgeois" citizens. As for Chambers's own character, "I knew him as a most disinterested and honest man, very kind and gentle, incapable of inflicting pain on any living creature."²³

Others have also corroborated Chambers's role as an underground courier during those same years. Ella Winter, for example, recalled recently having been approached in her New York hotel room in 1933 by "Harold Phillips," whom she later identified as Chambers. Phillips asked Winter to transport a large sum of money from New York to California for the underground—"only cash, not a check"—but, on the advice of her friend in the CP, Robert Minor, she declined. "Don't get mixed up with their spy rings," she quotes Minor as telling her.²⁴

Contacting Winter several more times with additional requests, Chambers once asked that she go to Washington and search through the desk of her friend William Bullitt, whom President Roosevelt had just appointed as the first American Ambassador to the Soviet Union. Winter was supposed to take from his desk any papers she felt would be of interest to the CP. She went to Washington to congratulate Bullitt on his appointment, but, although she later told Chambers about the trip, would not steal any papers.²⁵

But Chambers would not give up on Ella Winter. She recalls that he badly wanted to meet a friend of hers who, in 1934, held a high post on the Nye Committee. (Chambers met Alger Hiss at that same time when Hiss first began working for the Committee.) The Nye Committee's work interested the Communist underground primarily because of the opportunities offered for military or industrial espionage through access to the files of some of America's leading arms manufacturers, such as the Du Pont Corporation. Thus Robert Cantwell was offered \$25,000 to write a favorable book about the Du Ponts by Chambers's associate John Sherman in hopes that Cantwell could then infiltrate the company's records.²⁶

Although Ella Winter agreed to introduce Chambers to her friend on the Nye Committee, she refused to accede to the conspiratorial preparations on which "Harold Phillips" insisted, such as meeting in an out-of-the-way New York location, using a password, and similar routine procedures for underground agents. Chambers broke off further contact with Winter,

* Chambers then took the money to California himself, according to FBI informant William Edward Crane.

perhaps at the instructions of superiors, who must have realized belatedly that she was far more useful as an open sympathizer with the Party, as a writer, as Lincoln Steffens's wife, and as a successful fund-raiser for the Communists' West Coast labor-organizing efforts.²⁷

Periodically during the mid-Thirties "Karl" would also approach friends such as Herbert Solow, Meyer Schapiro, and even Lionel and Diana Trilling to serve as "letter drops" for underground messages or to provide other assistance. More often than not, these friends declined to cooperate, especially since relations between Communists and most others on the American left had soured by 1934, a rift symbolized by the efforts of a CP goon squad that year to break up a Socialist rally in Madison Square Garden.²⁸

A Columbia friend who agreed to help Chambers at one point was David Zabladowsky, who testified in 1952 before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee that he had delivered a message in 1936 from Chambers to J. Peters. When asked if he knew that Peters was an espionage agent, Zabladowsky replied: "Yes, in a sense I did. I knew that Whittaker Chambers was, but very specifically on a certain matter, which was underground work against Germany, or against Hitler." Zabladowsky also testified that, at Chambers's request, he subsequently delivered an envelope containing material connected with an illegal Communist passport ring to a man whose name he could not remember.^{*29}

In avowing that opposition to Hitler and to Nazi Germany had "triggered" a brief involvement with Soviet espionage, Zabladowsky was hardly unique. The Communist Party, in America and in many European countries, cited the growing menace of fascist militarism as one of its strongest arguments for engaging the loyalties of many non-Communists, and the services of some in "secret work" during the 1930s. At a time when Western European governments seemed determined to appease both Hitler and Mussolini, until the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, some justification existed for arguing that the Russians stood almost alone in urging militant opposition to the so-called "anti-Comintern powers"—Germany, Italy, and Japan.

For Soviet espionage agents in the United States during the Thirties gave a good deal of attention to Japan, as well as to the European fascist regimes. Even during his earliest days as a Communist agent in 1932 Chambers performed counter-espionage work against Japanese agents on the East Coast. He told Herbert Solow in 1933 "that some Jap spies had been caught in an aircraft plant on L.I. by the American counter-espionage [presumably military intelligence agents], and I understood from what he said

* But who was identified in letters written by Chambers after his break as a Latvian named "Ewald" by his Soviet underground associates, and whose story figured both in Chambers's decision to defect and in Alger Hiss's involvement with Chambers. See the Robinson-Rubens case materials in Chapters VII and IX. ("Ewald" later used both of those other pseudonyms.)

that his organization had been instrumental in helping the Americans catch those Japs." Throughout the 1930s Russian military leaders feared a possible Japanese invasion along the Soviet Union's sparsely defended eastern frontier, and in this connection it is important to recall that Chambers worked not for the "civilian" GPU but directly for the Soviet Army's Fourth Branch military intelligence unit. Thus Robert Cantwell also remembered Chambers's talk about encounters with Japanese agents, as well as his special interest in military installations such as the New London naval base, where Chambers claimed to have engaged in espionage.³⁰

Despite his use of pseudonyms, secret passwords, and the like, Chambers never really treated seriously the element of secrecy itself during the time he took part in supposedly "secret work" in New York City and along the East Coast from 1932 to early 1934. He maintained contacts with friends outside the underground and even outside the Party, and he recounted choice tidbits of his network's lore to them. Only when J. Peters ordered Chambers to move to the Baltimore-Washington area in 1934, after Ulrich's departure, did he conduct himself more appropriately as an agent, although even then he continued to visit non-CP friends during frequent trips to New York on business matters.

J. Peters and the Soviet Spy Ring in Japan

Peters became an increasingly important figure in Chambers's life once Ulrich and Elaine had returned to Moscow. Max Bedacht had instructed Chambers in 1933 to regard Peters as his primary contact with the American CP, although the new recruit continued to meet with both men for a time that year. Somewhat confused, Chambers had approached Ulrich and asked which of the two, Bedacht or Peters, he should deal with. The Russian cited a Turkish proverb: "When dealing with wolves, choose the one who has eaten." He meant Bedacht, who at the time was more influential within the Party than Peters, but Chambers found the latter "very friendly and helpful." After Bedacht's departure for other assignments later that year, Chambers maintained contact between his Russian superiors and the American Communist underground network for the next five years exclusively through J. Peters, whose headquarters was in the CP's office building near New York's Union Square.*³¹

* Peters's leading role in such secret work was confirmed at the time of the Hiss case not only by Chambers but by many other witnesses summoned to testify at his deportation hearings and also by people who had met him in his underground guise, such as David Zabladowsky and Lee Pressman. Additional and more convincing corroboration of Peters's work as an agent during the 1930s came from FBI testimony by one of his operatives, William Edward Crane; from my interviews with Maxim Lieber, whom Peters assigned to occasional underground jobs; and from the recollections of Nadya Ulanovskaya, with whose husband, Ulrich, Peters had shared leadership of the spy network from 1931 to 1934.

It was Peters who introduced Chambers to still another Russian agent in 1934 after Ulrich had left; with this man, known only as "Bill," he maintained irregular contact until 1936. That year "Bill" was replaced by Chambers's final Russian spymaster, a man he later identified as Colonel Boris Bykov. Sometime in 1934 Chambers learned that all of his Russian supervisors came from the Fourth Branch and not the GPU.

That same year Peters also introduced Chambers to the head of the Soviet underground cell in Washington, Harold Ware, so that the latter could use Chambers as a courier between his group and Peters's New York headquarters. Before Chambers moved permanently to Washington in mid-1934, however, "Bill" outlined plans that attracted him far more than did Peters's scheme. As Chambers told it, Bill "stated that he was going to England to head a Soviet apparatus which would be located in London." He urged Chambers to accompany him and "further suggested that I should provide myself with a cover such as representative of a legitimate American firm." After discussing the proposition with Peters, the latter "brought me together with Maxim Lieber, whom I had previously known in the John Reed Club."³²

Then attracting attention as an authors' representative, Lieber was an open Communist Party member and proved agreeable to the plan devised by Bill, Peters, and Chambers. "It was arranged that the apparatus would finance the opening of a branch in London for Lieber's firm. I [Chambers] was to be the head of the office as Lieber's representative and would do a regular job of seeing authors and preparing manuscripts received by Britons for Lieber."

Plans for the scheme dragged on throughout 1934 and early 1935, with Peters even obtaining for Chambers a false passport in May 1935 in the name "David Breen." (Peters also arranged to have the name of Chambers's daughter changed on her Atlantic City, New Jersey, birth certificate from Ellen Chambers to "Ursula Breen" to facilitate obtaining her passport.) Lieber, in turn, accompanied Chambers to the British Consulate in New York, where he "certified that I was the individual who was to represent him in London. As a result I was given a resident visa." Although Bill's hopes for an English operation fell through and were eventually abandoned, Chambers used the name "David Breen" at his various residences in 1935.³³

But the plan followed an earlier scheme in 1934—also involving Chambers and Lieber, this time assisted by John Sherman. After leaving New York in 1933, Sherman had worked for the CP on the West Coast, primarily in attempts to gain information concerning Japan. He received orders, presumably from Russian superiors, to move his base of operations to Japan itself and returned East searching for a legitimate business cover behind which he could set up a Japanese espionage network.* Bill assigned

* Soviet military intelligence units devised several such plans for establishing spy rings in Japan during the mid-1930s, the most spectacularly successful of which—led by

Chambers to the task of helping Sherman to devise such a *modus operandi* and, at the same time, to procure an American-born Japanese assistant who could work with Sherman in Japan, preferably one with connections to high political circles there.

The task proved formidable, and Chambers turned almost immediately to Lieber for a solution. Since the idea of an English branch of Lieber's agency seemed stalled, Chambers proposed (the idea may have come from Sherman) that the three men use Lieber's reputation to establish in Japan a news-gathering organization called the American Feature Writers Syndicate. Sherman and his assistant could then proceed to Japan under the guise of legitimate foreign correspondents, and Lieber from his agency's New York office would handle the sale and distribution of whatever genuine news stories they produced in Japan. Lieber agreed, and in August 1934 the plan went into operation.³⁴

Chambers, Sherman, and Lieber registered the American Feature Writers Syndicate as a business enterprise in New York State. Only Lieber used his real name. Chambers signed the incorporation papers as "Lloyd Cantwell" and gave Lieber's office as his address. Sherman signed as "Charles F. Chase" (Peters promptly obtained a false passport for Sherman in that name on September 24, 1934, and "Chase" soon left for Japan). Peters also provided between \$5,000 and \$10,000, which Chambers deposited in a Chemical Bank branch near Lieber's office for use in financing the latter's expenses on the operation and to reimburse "correspondents" for any stories filed from Japan. Lieber had "AMERICAN FEATURE WRITERS SYNDICATE" inscribed on his office door and negotiated with CP sympathizers who worked for the *American Mercury*, the *New York Post*, and other possible users of the stories Sherman sent back, some of whom commissioned articles on the spot (although only the *New York Post* actually printed any of the pieces). Chambers even found a Japanese-American assistant for "Chase," a promising young painter and open-Party member named Hideo Noda, who was related to the Japanese imperial family.

During the early 1930s Lieber had gained prominence in the New York publishing world by bringing to public attention the writings of previously unknown young clients such as Erskine Caldwell, Josephine Herbst, and Albert Halper. He was probably the country's foremost agent specializing in social-realist writers who were themselves politically radical. The occasional use of this well-known authors' representative in secret Communist operations seemed quite normal in the more casual and freewheeling atmosphere within which Soviet intelligence expanded operations in the United States during the 1930s.

Richard Sorge—was finally broken up by Japanese counter-intelligence only during the Second World War. Sorge, parenthetically, began his career as an agent working as Ulrich's assistant in a Shanghai network in 1929.

Although Lieber recently excoriated Chambers's later decision to testify against fellow members of the CP underground ("the only thing I bear against him was that he exposed a lot of honest, decent, dedicated people"), he remembers fondly his personal association with Chambers. The Hiss-Chambers case brought Lieber to the attention of the FBI, and it ruined his literary agency.³⁵

Maxim Lieber has confirmed the essential account of the relationship between himself and Chambers that the latter first publicly described in 1948. "We were all Communists," Lieber noted, and "[besides] I regarded him as a friend." The literary agent and the CP courier shared common interests in literature, music, and chess during the many visits Chambers paid to Lieber's Manhattan apartment and to his Pennsylvania farm between 1934 and 1938. "Some things are romanticized in *Witness* [Chambers's memoir]," Lieber feels, "but most of it—as I know of the incidents—is true." Furthermore, "Chambers, Chase, and I set up that Syndicate [on orders from Peters]. We *did* organize it, as Chambers said. In fact, I had hopes of getting an agent contact in London from the [earlier] deal or in Japan, but nothing worked out." Lieber agreed that the American Communist Party engaged in espionage during this period, as Chambers detailed. "There were cells in Washington, no question. The ninth floor, for example, [of] the Party's Central Committee [CP headquarters in New York, where J. Peters had his office] knew of my relations with Chambers. So did Peters. Peters knew."³⁶

Lieber also attested to Chambers's version of how the entire Japanese network scheme was scrubbed in 1935, apparently as a result of an error on "Bill's" part. The Russian contacted Chambers, said that there had been "arrests" in Tokyo, and fretted that "Chase" might have been among those taken into custody. Bill instructed Chambers to close down the American Feature Writers Syndicate immediately, and that same day the latter "destroyed all the stationery, closed out the bank account, and took the name off Lieber's door." Lieber, for his part, remembered handling these details: "Whittaker came in one day, very agitated, and he said, 'You must break up your organization. Get rid of your secretaries.'" The liquidation process, in which both probably took part, proved even simpler, since the syndicate had no secretaries of its own but merely shared office space with Lieber's literary agency. Chambers received the remaining cash in the bank account, while Lieber resumed his normal business.³⁷

Pleased with his efficient termination of the syndicate, Chambers met with Bill again the next day, only to learn that the Russians had been mistaken: "the whole thing was an error and there had been no arrests." It turned out that several Soviet agents who knew about the Japanese network had been arrested in Europe, but to Bill even this seemed sufficient reason to halt operations in Tokyo and order both Sherman and Noda back to the United States. On his way to Moscow, John Sherman stopped in New York,

where Chambers obtained (again through J. Peters) another false passport for him, after which he left for the Soviet Union.

On the heels of "Chase"/Sherman's departure, Hideo Noda reappeared in New York in late 1935 and immediately contacted both Chambers and their mutual friend, Noda's benefactor Meyer Schapiro. The latter, a Socialist and anti-Stalinist, regretted his earlier introduction of the impressionable Noda to Chambers. He now urged "Ned" to abandon underground work, leave the Communist Party, and resume normal life as a painter. Noda repeated this conversation to Chambers several days later. After listening to the account, Chambers, despite instructions from Bill to arrange for Noda's transfer to another Soviet apparatus in France, urged the painter to follow his mentor's advice. Noda "seemed to me to be in the wrong occupation," Chambers would tell the FBI in 1949. Besides, "maybe Schapiro is right." Shortly after this conversation Peters told Chambers that Noda had denounced him as a Trotskyite, the most serious accusation possible within CP circles at the time. But the disbelieving Peters, according to Chambers, brushed aside the charge, and Noda left for France. Within a year he was ordered back to Japan to work with a new network, and he died there of natural causes in 1939.³⁸

The earlier Japanese spy ring, the American Feature Writers Syndicate, had been a fiasco, and Noda and Sherman between them gained little if any information of value during an eight-month period. "Chase" wrote several articles that eventually appeared in the *New York Post*, but otherwise turned out to be a remarkably indifferent operative. "Chase never did much work," Chambers told Herbert Solow in 1938, who promptly transcribed the conversation. "He let Ned [Noda] waste his time. He [Chase] played handball, and won the Jap medal ["Charles Chase" did win the Japanese championship handball tournament held in 1935 at the Tokyo YMCA], which they mailed to the New York business address [Lieber's] after the journalist left Tokyo for Moscow."³⁹

The Move to Washington

With the collapse of the American Feature Writers Syndicate, Chambers could devote full-time energies to new responsibilities in the Baltimore-Washington area. He had moved his family there in August 1934, shortly after Peters introduced him to Harold Ware at a New York restaurant. The three Soviet agents discussed Chambers's future duties in Washington as a courier between Peters and the Ware Group. Chambers described the meeting to the FBI in 1949: "I understood that most of the members of this group were employed in 'New Deal Agencies.' According to what Peters told me, it was his 'dream' to penetrate the 'old line agencies,' such as the Navy, State, Interior, etc. I was to learn the setup and the personnel

of the present apparatus [Ware's group, whose members worked mainly for the more recent—and perhaps temporary—New Deal agencies such as the AAA] and attempt to build a parallel apparatus . . . using certain members of the Ware Group at first and then branching out. Consequently, about the end [of the summer] or in the fall of 1934, I made my first trip to Washington, D.C., where I met Harold Ware by pre-arrangement.”⁴⁰

Commuting frequently between Washington and New York during these months, Chambers informed Peters of genuine progress in gaining underground recruits for this “parallel apparatus.” During trips to New York he also continued to visit his non-Communist friends and kept in touch with them, in addition, by mail, discussing mainly personal or family news. One letter confided to the Meyer Schapiros that he (Chambers) had just been awarded a “high honor” by the Soviet government for his services as an agent, an award he later identified to Herbert Solow as “the Lenin Order.” Despite peculiarities as an underground operative, Chambers—that most un-secret agent—had apparently earned the respect of his colleagues and superiors.⁴¹

The clearest token of J. Peters's confidence in this writer-turned-spy was his willingness to entrust his own pet project to Chambers's hands: the organization into a “sleeper apparatus”—agents in place awaiting orders at some future time—of Washington's most promising Communist or pro-Soviet government officials. Peters would not be disappointed by the results. Once based in Washington, amid new surroundings and unfamiliar contacts, Chambers adopted a more circumspect behavior pattern, of the sort normally expected of secret agents. It could even be argued that, in this sense, “Karl” became a secret agent (as opposed to an underground one) for the first time when he moved to Washington. Although Chambers often visited New York City during his remaining years in the apparatus, he served Soviet intelligence from mid-1934 to 1938 primarily as an organizer among covert Communists within Washington and as a conduit for their stolen documents.