

April 21, 1974
Av. Sabona 35, Apt. 11
Monte Estoril, Port.

Dear Alden:

Re your letter of Mar. 25 -
I knew relatively little about
Whitaker Chambers. A lot of
gossip and hearsay, of course -
none of it reliable. What I've
done here is put down what
I know from personal exper-
ience. It all seems trivial
- but here it is.

Best wishes to you and your
book. Paul (PETERS)

I had only three encounters with Whitaker Chambers; so I can hardly say that I knew him well. The first occurred in the early 1930s, at the height of the depression, when he wrote a much-praised story about the resistance of farmers to mortgage closures by the banks. It appeared in the New Masses and created a stir.

I had, at that time, just finished a winter of working as a hired hand on a farm in Wisconsin. That was part of my plan to learn all about the American people by working at various jobs--boat hand, steelmill worker, wharf worker, knitting mill hand, etc.---and writing a play about each experience. A rather fanciful idea, though I note that a college president has done exactly this recently and written a book about it. When I read Whitaker Chambers' story, Can You Hear Their Voices?, I thought I could use some of the plot elements for my farm play and wrote for permission. Somewhere, in this time, I met him. I recall thinking that he seemed very cocky and arrogant in his assumed knowledge of just what should be done about the depression, labor and farm organization, politics, and economics. My farm play wasn't very good; I destroyed it and saw little of W.C. for a while.

Encounter No. 2 came some years later. I got a call from him saying could he meet me somewhere, since he had something to talk over with me. I suggested my house, his house, a restaurant---no, none would do. At his suggestion, though I thought he was acting very melodramatically and being rather silly, ~~he suggested~~ I met him in a cafeteria, somewhere in the Times Square area, far back in a remote corner of the place, reached by winding through all sorts of underground (subway) passages. He was mysterious about the purpose of all this. Finally, he asked if I could get a Washington news reporter I knew to pass on interesting information about U.S. politics. This was, of course, ^{before} the great boom in spy stories and spy books and I was simply amazed. Who was the get this information? He grinned a toothless grin and pointed a stumpy thumb at himself. I thought simply that he was either out of his mind ~~and~~ putting on some great act for literary purposes. Maybe he was playing spy (although I didn't even think of it as spying), as I played, for literary purposes, at being a wharf hand, a sailor on an oil tanker, a factory worker, a farm laborer. In any case, I said I did not know the Washington man well enough to ask anything like that; he wouldn't do it if he were asked; and it was entirely out of my line of activity. Actually, I thought the whole thing was just silly and W.C. was slightly cracked.

Then I heard no more from him for years. I did, however, hear about him. I ran into an Armenian composer of music one day whom I had met earlier (I have completely forgotten his name) who, in the course of chit-chat, told me a fantastic story about W.C. He said W.C. had taken a trip by Pullman coach to Washington with him. I don't know what the composer of music was going to Washington for, but I gathered that W.C. had some government business in Washington to attend to (so the composer said). To save money they shared a single berth. According to the composer, W.C. made homosexual approaches.

At the time of the Hiss-Chambers eruption, you probably heard

all the rumors I heard about the homosexual aspects of the case. Every newspaperman knew them. The only thing I knew, for a fact, was that W.C. had, in the meantime, married a woman who used to live in a house over on Tompkins Square (where the Christadora House subsequently stood). It was owned by an Irish undertaker who occupied the front house. Behind his place, through a courtyard, was the rear house, with a Herald-Tribune reporter and myself on one side; and on the other, Gurley Flynn and Carlo Tresca, and Esther Chemitz and another girl from the South, who had written a novel called To Earn My Bread (name of author forgotten). We all thought the two girls were lesbians. Certainly, Esther was very masculine in speech, dress, and manner. *She later appeared as Mrs. Whitaker Chambers.*

Of course, this was all rumor and hearsay and may have no basis in fact--the homosexual element, I mean. The Communist Party at that time, as I recall, was denouncing homosexuals as degenerate and demanding their expulsion. That seemed to me silly, just as the attempt, on the part of left sympathizers, to make a homosexual villain out of W.C. was silly. The C.P. attitude, of course, arose from the fact that van der Lubbe (sp?), of Reichstag fire fame, was presumably homosexual. Still, the rumors about W.C. persisted and I suppose in any account of the case should be mentioned.

The third and last time I met W.C. was at a screening of a movie in a preview movie projection room somewhere far west in NYC. The movie was made from Robert Sherwood's play, Abe Lincoln In Illinois. I was reviewing movies for the Life magazine. My researcher, a young Irish girl named Helen Robinson, was with me. On the way out we ran into Whitaker Chambers. He was reviewing movies for Time. I said hello and kept my mouth shut because, by this time, I had heard the wildest stories about him. Everybody I knew on the Luce publications (this was at the time when the staff included Dwight McDonald, Archie MacLesh, James Agee, Herbert Zolotow, Robert Cantwell, John Hersey, Ralph Ingersoll, etc.) thought he was plain crazy. He was reported to keep a gun in his desk and had told people that somebody was trying to murder him. Nobody liked him. He kept aloof from all Luce staffers and acted damned strange. However, this meeting was the first time I had actually seen him in connection with Time-Life activities. Helen Robinson asked him how he liked the movie. "I'm sick and tired of that half-baked liberal crap," he replied venomously. He went on a bit in that tenor. Helen kept on questioning him coolly. I thought: I don't want to get into this: the man is off his trolley. Of course, there is a Lincoln myth; but the idea of attributing it to a sinister "liberal" conspiracy seemed to me utterly wild.

Years later, on reading Swanberg's Harry Luce and His Empire (not Harry, I guess) I noted that he reported Luce considered W.C.'s review of The Grapes of Wrath the best review of any movie he had ever read (or something like that). "Who wrote it?" he asked and from then on W.C.'s career was on its way. I never saw that review and can't get it in Portugal but I often wonder if he didn't then, too, condemn it as "liberal crap." Otherwise, I doubt if Harry Luce would have been so ecstatic as to label it the best movie review he ever read. Luce, as far as I could

find, was never interested in good writing as such. If an article concurred with his opinions, it was great; if it didn't, it was bad. For one of the dummies of Life magazine that I worked on in the summer of 1936 (my first months on Time Inc.), he wanted a long article on Chiang Kai-shek and China. I read all the books and wrote a fairly objective piece about the Chiang Kai-sheks (both of them), the Kuomintang, the long trek of the communist forces, who had eluded him and now threatened to overthrow him. I was, of course, very naive. I actually took the Time Inc. editors at their word when they said they wanted objective reporting. Luce was furious. "Oh, it's good journalism," he snapped, "but you're way off." Then, somewhat more moderately: "If you don't mind, I'll have somebody else take a crack at this." He turned it over to Goldsborough. The article, when it appeared (in either Dummy or Rehearsal--the two prepublication versions of LIFE), had Chiang organizing the youth of China into a great, powerful force, arousing the moral fervor of the Chinese people, defeating the Communists, etc. etc. etc. Not long afterwards Chiang had fled to the bosom of the U.S. Navy in Taiwan. It must have been a fearful blow to Harry Luce. God had let him down.

I don't know that W.C. and Laird Goldsborough were on Time at the same time. My impression is that W.C. was Goldsborough's successor. Goldsborough was pushed out rather early in the Spanish Civil War, when he aroused a veritable deluge of furious reader correspondence by his pro-Franco pieces, one of which blasted "the rabble that dared to rise against their betters." (Memory; may not be totally accurate). The whole staff revolted, too. Luce was somewhat shaken. The rule had been that nobody ever touched G's copy: it was sacrosanct. You'll get all of this in Swanberg (which, Wilfred Sheed to the contrary, seemed to me a very accurate picture). But at this time Ralph Ingersoll had become publisher of Time. Ingersoll was reputedly having an affair with Lillian Hellman and had developed some liberal ideas. One was that the American public didn't like Franco, that it was Franco--and not the rabble--that had risen against their betters, and that Goldsborough had outlived his usefulness on Time. For other slants on the subject of Goldsborough, read Charles Wertenbaker's The Death of Kings, which tells of the staff revolt within the organization; John Brooks' novel (The Big Wheel); Merle Miller's That Winter; Kenneth Fearing's The Big Clock (simply a murder thriller with Luce as maniacal killer), etc.

I did not know Goldsborough--I used to see him in the hall, but he was a monstrous-looking man, hard of hearing, scornfully indifferent to anybody else on the staff, hated by all, and laughed at with his Rolls Royce and his chauffeur. My recollection, but I might be wrong, is that he had committed suicide before W.C. came to Time. W.C. was much more skilful and much more sinister, of course. He wrote, reputedly, from the communist inside and presumably knew from experience how exigent was a God-directed campaign against the communist menace. In this, of course, he saw eye to eye with Luce.

If you can find copies of a staff newspaper, written inside the office and distributed in mimeograph form, ~~xxxxixxxx~~ it might

give you some additional data. It was called High Time. I recall that Alex King was disturbed because High Time quoted him (King) as saying he was displeased with Archie MacLeash's Fortune article about the Jews controlling Wall Street. MacLeash wrote that, on the contrary, many of the leading Wall Street houses were anti-semitical and kept Jews off their staffs. Harry complained that MacLeash failed to explain why "everybody disliked the Jews." King objected not to High Time's reporting this but to attributing it to him. (Dwight MacDonald might have copies of High Time.)

One other story: The Time Inc. staff had a sort of party to raise money for the Spanish loyalist. Margaret Burke-White, I recall, gave some big photographs, which were auctioned off. Luce sent out an official memorandum objecting to this affair. Time had to be impartial and objective, he complained. The staff must not permit the readers to infer that it took sides. In view of the obvious slant of Goldsborough's early stories on Spain and in view of the fact that the staff party was strictly inside the organization, everybody was incensed. They were similarly incensed when an order came down from Il Luce's office a bit later stating that writers for Time, Inc. were not permitted to write anything whatever--books, articles, stories, poems, I suppose--for other publications. There was considerable objection and eventually, I believe, the order was rescinded. Or at least, it faded into desuetude.

elsewhere

I left LIFE early in 1941. I was not on the magazine during the heyday of W.C.'s career there--and during the Hiss affair. The people I knew on Time, Inc., of course, all considered W.C. completely psychotic. But after that day of the preview of Abe Lincoln in Illinois I never saw him again--nor wanted to. I suppose this ends my story.