

HSS FILES

January 19, 1949

Conversation with Karl Helfrich,
Forstmann Woolen Company, Passaic, New Jersey

"I talked to Mr. Helfrich by telephone today.

"Helfrich was assigned Whittaker Chambers as a roommate at the beginning of his freshman year at Williams in September 1920. They roomed in Morgan Hall. They both arrived a few days before college opened and furnished their room and made the usual preparations for beginning of college. Helfrich had never seen or heard of Chambers before.

"Helfrich thought that Chambers acted peculiarly, seemed rather morose and devoted to reading the scripture.

"The night college opened, there was a dinner for the freshman class in Currier Hall. Helfrich asked Chambers to go with him to the dinner but Chambers said that he would not go, that he preferred to stay in his room and read the Bible.

"Helfrich went to the dinner and upon his return to his room that evening, Chambers told him that a 'great light had come to him' and that he proposed to leave Williams that very night to go to Columbia to take a course in journalism. Helfrich said to him that this seemed somewhat abrupt but Chambers insisted and proceeded to pack up his bag and take the midnight train to New York. He asked Helfrich to sell their furniture and to send Chambers a check for half the proceeds which Helfrich ultimately did.

"Thereafter, over a period of some six weeks, Helfrich received a number of very long letters from Chambers written in longhand running to over twelve pages each. They described peculiar adventures of Chambers which Helfrich thought at the time must have been invented. He cannot remember much about them except one incident in which Chambers told about having been in a mining camp and of having seen 'murder at the worst under my nose.' In one of these letters, Chambers mentioned the high school graduation incident in which he delivered the essay that he had been told not to deliver. It was an essay on Woodrow Wilson which Chambers said was very critical of Wilson and in very bad taste.

"Helfrich's new roommate after Chambers left was George Degener. He read the letters and may recall more about them.

"After Chambers had been gone about six weeks, he wrote

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Helfrich a letter saying that there would be a letter at the post office addressed to some other name. Helfrich does not remember the name. Chambers asked Helfrich to get this letter and to readdress it to Chambers at his New York address.

"Helfrich went to the post office and found the letter there. He and Degener decided that it might be some crime in tampering with the mails to send a letter addressed to one person to another person. They decided that they had better consult the president of the college about it, Dr. Garfield. Before seeing Dr. Garfield, they steamed open the letter and read it. They then sealed it up again and took it to Dr. Garfield. Degener was with Helfrich at that interview.

"Dr. Garfield spoke at some length about whether he should open the letter and finally decided he should. This was amusing to Helfrich since he knew all the time what was in it.

"After they had read the letter together, Garfield told them to forget about it and leave everything in his hands and not to answer any further communications from Chambers.

"The letter in question was one written by Whittaker to himself. Helfrich cannot remember much about it except that it was 'a weird recital.' He was reminded of it when he read Chambers' 'The Devil' article in Life. Apparently it dealt with some mystic communion between Chambers and the Devil or something of that sort. There was nothing about Communism in it.

"About a week later Helfrich got another letter from Chambers in which he said he was disappointed in Helfrich, that he was not the man he had supposed he was and that he must have told somebody about the letters because he, Chambers, had received a visit from some postal inspectors.

"Helfrich did not answer the letter, never heard from Chambers again and has never seen him since the night he left college."

E. C. McL.

EDWARD McLEAN

~~What could be the meaning of such a letter? It is possible that~~

~~Chambers was then a young man of 19 years, involved in a deep identity conflict with himself. He was seriously lost, confused, and desperate.~~

~~SAN FRANCISCO~~

914-789-3432

April 22, 1969

Mr. George Degener
R.F.D. No. 2
Millerton, N.Y. 12546

Dear Mr. Degener:

I am addressing this letter to you in connection with a book on Whittaker Chambers that I am writing under contract to Simon and Schuster.

An event that occurred during Chambers' brief sojourn at Williams College in September 1928 is of pivotal importance to the man's life; and in the hope that you might be able to shed some light on it, I quote from

In a book which Viking Press published in 1967, Friendship and Fratricide by Meyer A. Zeligs, there is a further reference to this episode in which (at page 57) you are identified as a person who accompanied Helfrich to the post office and who is then later involved in the discussions with the late Dr. Garfield and with the postal authorities.

Since Dr. Garfield is dead, and since Karl Helfrich's memory of this episode was not too clear at the Hiss trials (and since he was not able to locate any correspondence relating to the event), I wonder if you yourself might be able to remember anything at all about this puzzling episode in the life of a man who later came to have such an enormous impact on the life of this country.

I am also curious about the fact that Helfrich was called as a witness in both Hiss trials but you were not, apparently, asked to give testimony by either side. My curiosity on this point is enhanced by the fact that in the papers of Edward McLean, who was chief investigating member of the Hiss counsel for the first trial and who is now a federal district court judge for the Southern District of New York, I have found a reference, based on a telephone conversation he had on January 19, 1949, to this same incident; in his memorandum of that date Mr. McLean had noted:

Helfrich's new roommate after Chambers left was George Degener. He read the letters and may recall more about them.

Would you be able, and willing (for or without attribution) to tell me anything at all either about the incident itself or about any of the possible reasons (if you yourself are aware of them) why neither side chose to call you as a witness at the Hiss trials?

For anything at all that you can tell me to help broaden my understanding of Whittaker Chambers---any impressions at all that you retain of the man---I assure you I shall be most grateful.

Yours very sincerely,

William A. Reuben

William A. Reuben

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