

Erwinna Penna. 18920
November 6, 1968

Dear Mr. Reuben:

In answer to your further inquires about Whittaker Chambers:

1. The single summer during which I saw Chambers in Washington was 1934 and the month, August.

2. I saw Chambers in the apartment, ^{of} my husband, John Herrmann, ~~was~~ in Washington. Neither my husband or Chambers ever disclosed to me the nature of their connection. Chambers would appear, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. I did not know anything about him except that he was referred to as Carl. It was terribly hot, he liked the iced coffee I made. We talked about a variety of subjects, all related to leftist activities, here and abroad.

It should be clear that I was a well-known writer and definitely left. I was never a card-carrying Communist but it was often assumed that I was because I did have the confidence of the Party. In fact I could not have made some of the trips I was to make, in Cuba, Germany in 1935 without the helpful tips and connections provided by the Party. My own confidence in the Party began to shake in 1935 and odd though it may sound, because of some of the very changes which the official left here welcomed. But the education of children in Russia, remarkably progressive, was then modified; girls were separated from boys and military training established for very young boys. Stalin was recommending big families, giving prizes to mothers a la Hitler and Mussolini. Definite preference was being given to the children of the Communist bureaucracy. The leadership method with children also seemed to me to be creating a brutalized system; what was going to happen to the sensitive child? In addition; concentration camps were instituted for homosexuals. It was also the beginning of the Popular Front; this had a dual effect upon me, as an individual. As someone predominately conscious of the threat of Nazism and Fascism, I saw the communists as the only party willing to combat militantly these forces. But here, I also saw the deleterious effect it had in the vulgarization of the intellectual side of the Left.

{ There was never the slightest doubt about "Carl." He was definitely a Communist and definitely connected with some kind of under-cover operations. John Herrmann's position was also ambivalent to me; he could have been a party member; I never knew for certain. The ambivalence was a contributing cause to our separation in 1935. There was also to my knowledge a certain amount of underground activity on the part of the Communists in Washington. From what I could gather it was more or less of an innocuous variety and largely maintained to keep officials, most of them petty, in the government, interested enough to remain alive to Communist procedures. They did, I am convinced, furnish some petty memorandum; I have always doubted if it was of any strategic significance. The CP was officially recognized; you could vote for it. I did not favor underground in a country where it was still possible to carry on legalized propaganda. The assumption of the Communists upon which these procedures were based, were, however, in the main correct. There was to be a new great war; and ~~eventually~~ eventually Soviet Russia would be regarded as a prime enemy. The Cold War which came out into

the open after the World II end, had actually begun, in fact, with the official position toward the Bolsheviks in 1917.

3. The FBI came to see me first after the trials arose about Hiss. They wanted information on Hiss. I had never met Hiss, but from my knowledge of what might be called Communist cells in Washington, I never believed for a moment the exact charges Chambers leveled against him. The C P in Washington was not always very clever, so far as I could judge, and I might say that as a correspondent I had some reason to trust some of my findings. But they would never have been so stupid, in my opinion, as to expose a valued man like Hiss, to the cell process. Hiss would have been secret, with a man to man connection. I never believed the testimony of the ex-German Communist Hedda Massing, whom I knew very well, and had good reasons for thinking she was a rank opportunist and a liar. On the other hand, I did believe that Hiss was in deeper than he ever disclosed. Perhaps for personal reasons he couldn't say all. But I do not think it would have been possible for him as a very intelligent man to commit the blunders alleged by Chambers. Nor would the C P, bungling as they were in other matters, have put him in an exposed position where he might have done so.

Hiss's lawyers also came to see me, because of my Leftist stance. But my position had already altered by the late forties. I had been fired from my situation on the German desk of our propaganda agency in Washington in 1942. I have written about that, and also about the trip that John Herrmann and I took to Russia in a published work in new American Review #3 and it might be a useful for background of the moods of the time, its intricacies, and various types of opposition to officialdom, to read it. It is called "~~GENERALIZATION~~" "Yesterday's Road" and is part of a long work which I am now attempting to complete on the the 20's, thirties and with references to NOW all along the way. I had been too profoundly upset by the purges in Russia of 1937 to be quite so upset by the Nazi-Soviet pact as some of my contemporaries, but I knew Stalin had brought in an Ice Age. I never became a violent anti-Communist, regardless, and I may say that in my opinion that view was too easy. It became a racket in a certain period and made of many intellectuals passive during the McCarthy period. I never hesitated to speak out in that period, and in fact wrote a pamphlet in defense of Harvey O'Connor for the Emergency Civil Liberties then.

I never saw Carl in the vicinity of Erwinna. I knew Maxim Lieber well; he was my literary agent and I visited his home in Ferndale. The visit to my house was supposedly made by an important faction of an agrarian commission of the Communist Party, which was a viable reason, as John Herrmann had been interested in the farm movement and had even worked with Hal Ware in Washington. He had also helped to organize the Pennsylvania Farms

Now know he lived in the vicinity.

Protective Association, by no means an absolutely C U oriented group and a real battling organization for some of the basic rights of dairy farmers. Miss was presumed to have been a member of this strategy planning committee which allegedly gathered at my house. In Easter of 1935 I was in Cuba. In Easter of 1934 neither Herrmann nor myself was in residence at that period. The visit was allegedly made to Erwinna. I was never a resident myself in Washington but there only for a little more than a month in 1934, as indicated above.

The FBI also were to quiz me about people I presumably knew but, though I was willing to relate anything about my own activities -- in fact they were already an open book as I wrote about them -- I refused to go so far as to be an informer. They finally and without further molestation, believed me and let me alone.

[When I spoke of a certain sympathetic feeling for Chambers, that holds. The Manichean posture in politics which has been so devastating a factor in our own political life can be untruthful as well in personal matters. But though I found his nature sympathetic; he was gentle, courteous, eager to talk - but also vainglorious, as he boasted of "escapes" and so on, using revolutionary jargon -- I never believed his final testimony. That it should be considered a classic Dostoevskian revelation is beyond me.] He was a clumsy writer and his withdrawal from radical politics merely was a trip from one kind of totalitarianism to another. That's true of many of the anti-communists, who in the early fifties simply lost their abilities as critics of the American system and fell right in line with the official propaganda about the "free world." It was one thing to see clearly the Stalinist tyrannies and quite another to mount the white horse of United States virtue. Would Vietnam have come about as it has, if this situation had not been so corrosive?

Yours sincerely,

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P. S. May I add that the above information is furnished you as a sort of "off-the-cuff" data that newspaper people may get from someone who does not choose to be directly quoted. It is rather related to background material, and if you don't mind my suggesting it, I do consider that there is considerable work "in depth" lying ahead of you for the work you are undertaking.