

Lives and Deaths Of Whittaker Chambers

MAX ASCOLI

IN writing *Witness*, Whittaker Chambers has opened the second round of what he calls "the Case." This may turn out to be a service to the nation if—and it is a very large if, in no way dependent on Chambers—"the Case" is thoroughly and fearlessly debated, if his testimony is examined and cross-examined, as that of any witness must be. So far, there has not been much evidence of this.

Yet this time we are not taken by surprise, buffeted by headlines, stirred up by revelations or lurid gossip. This time we have a huge book in front of us to read and to ponder. The adventures of Alger Hiss, as told by Whittaker Chambers, are meant to corroborate the indictment to which Mr. Chambers, in his own terminology, bears witness. This indictment is against the prevailing values of our democracy and against the leaders who guided our nation through the New Deal and the war.

These men stand accused of having worked for the victory of our deadly enemy, Communism, although only a fraction of them did so knowingly. "Thus men who sincerely abhorred the word Communism, in the pursuit of common ends found that they were unable to distinguish Communists from themselves, except that it was just the Communists who were likely to be most forthright and most dedicated in the common cause. This political color-blindness was all the more dogged because it was completely honest. For men who could not see that what they firmly believed was liberalism added up to socialism could scarcely be expected to see what added up to Communism."

The author brings forth his indictment not in a bill of particulars but through a detailed description of what he himself has done and seen through-

out the whole range of his life. What happened to him is made to carry a message of universal and of immediate importance. The basic themes of his message are reiterated rather than explained, for the author, like other religious writers, relies on the habit-forming persuasiveness of reiteration.

Mr. Chambers's book must stand or fall on the validity of his indictment. It is not up to him to decide whether the religious message of his book has canonical virtue or is apocryphal. *Witness* cannot just be considered as a piece of literature or a contribution to the history of our times. We cannot put the book on the shelf, after having given the author an "A" as a storyteller, a "C" as a philosopher of contemporary history, and a "D" as a theologian. To do this is to exhibit at its weakest that facile liberalism which Chambers scorns.

The book is all of one piece. With artful and deliberate lack of discretion, the dismal, at times nightmarish life of this human being is exhibited to millions of Americans by the man who has had the hard luck to live it. For all its emphasis on religion, *Witness* is a political book and a major event in present-day American politics.

Chambers's is no isolated voice. For

years it has been first whispered, then said, then yelled into all the microphones of the nation that an unspecified number of our national leaders have knowingly or unknowingly conspired with the enemy. In creating these fears and apprehensions, no influence was greater than that of "the Case"—first round. Now all those who are prone to believe in the undefined, unspecified guilt of an Administration or of a generation will be heartened, for "the Case"—second round—has found the Book.

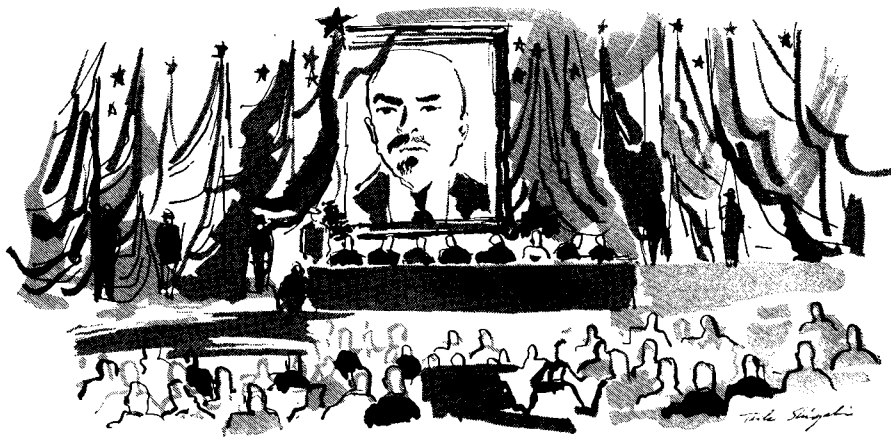
Motives and Justifications

In giving us the tale of his life, the author has set himself a number of different goals. He wants to denounce the Communist danger at home, to confess what his own role has been in the Communist conspiracy, to explain the queer halting course of his denunciation of Alger Hiss. He manages to give a justification for every instance where his behavior has been odd, as on the various occasions when he perjured himself. He wants to make of his past testimony in courts and in Congressional committees the evidence of his right to be a witness for his God.

Above all, he wants to get even with his enemies, as many another author of a religiously inspired book has done before him—Dante first of all, who, even from the height of the *Paradiso*, never stopped lashing out at those who had wronged him.

Scarcely anything that has been said against Chambers is left unchallenged or unanswered in this book. To those who questioned his sanity and searched for the peculiarities of his family background, he offers a clinical, detailed, sometimes lurid description of the traits that he inherited and the environment that shaped his youth. He





stretches himself on the couch, and tells the analysts—whom he hates en masse—all the things that they want to hear from him, and that fall into their set categories. Thus he reports how horrible he felt when, as a boy, he had to kill a chicken: “I tied the chicken’s legs and hung it, head down, from a nail, and as quickly and as mercifully as I could, severed its head. The knife fell as if gravity had jerked it from my hand. Then I hid.” He knows that some psychoanalysts will detect here the pattern of his behavior in later life. He dares them to.

Then he proceeds: “All right. As a man, I will kill. But I will kill always under duress, by an act of will, in knowing violation of myself, and always in rebellion against that necessity which I do not understand or agree to. Let me never kill unless I suffer that agony, for if I do not suffer it, I will be merely a murderer.” This passage is characteristic of the whole book; the author lifts himself to the pulpit by the bootstraps of his public self-analysis.

It was in his childhood, he says, that he developed “a deep distrust of the human race.” “I never had any real friends.” “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. We could scarcely be more foreign in China than in our alienation from the life around us.”

There is a ring of unquestionable truth in this description of his squalid childhood. For Chambers, schooling—the process of formal learning—never became an education. According to his own record, he never acquired

that modesty, that patience in comparing his ideas and feelings with those of other men before him and around him, which is education. All his life he has remained somewhat unrelated and lonely. For him the only way of communicating and perhaps of grasping ideas is by inflating to enormous proportions the accidents of his life.

In his youth he was an omnivorous reader. But of all the books he read the only one that made a dent on him was *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, that writer who created gigantic figures—all reeking of ham.

The Reader’s Burden

There are pages of *Witness* that cannot be read without a sense of horror, pages describing things that happened to the author which the reader wishes he had never read, for such things should not happen to any human being. This is the case, for instance, in that scene where, in Chambers’s house one night, his father beat and nearly killed his brother, until Chambers grappled with his father. Toward the end of the book, his description of his last attempt at suicide—when the Hiss case was reaching its climax—does not spare us any detail: Chambers lying in bed, breathing the poisonous fumes, the pictures of his children, one in each hand, and the letters on the table to be read after he is dead. But he has to tell the reader about the contents of these letters.

There seems to be no reason why millions of Americans should be made privy to such wretchedness—unless it be that although reading Chambers is no pleasure, being Chambers must be incomparably worse. The author knows this, and uses it to the hilt.

Invariably, society is made responsible for all the gruesome things that happened—such as the suicide of the author’s brother. With the crude precision of a case history, all the details are given of this unfortunate man’s drift toward death—for no force could stop him. Yet when at last he frees himself from what little life is left in him, the author says, “Such fortitude and such finality are like a smile before a firing squad.”

His Private World

In all his leaps from the episodic to the universal, from occurrences to ideas, Chambers seems to have a rather personal and peculiar notion of ideas that is unrelated to their socially established meaning.

Such is the case with his concept of history, which he obviously borrows from Marxism. The words “history” and “historical” appear with extraordinary frequency in the book, often several times on one page. Invariably “history” means necessity—a superhuman power that makes men act, and on which human will cannot exert much of an influence. To Chambers, history is not something that men make and for which they have a share of responsibility. The “logic of history” told Chambers that Communism was the only way out for the twentieth century. The man who leaves Communism finds “himself facing the crisis of history.” The party has a “historical purpose,” is manned by that “modern secular secret order which has dedicated its life and its death to initiating a new phase of history for mankind.” It is, of course, the party that has to “solve the immensely complicated problems of revolutionary struggle posed by history in our age.” “The motive forces of history conspire unknowably.” The first paragraph of the same page starts, “History was moving torrentially,” and he adds three lines later, “the historic crisis . . . reached a new crest.” He means that the Second World War was starting.

History, according to Chambers, moves in one direction: toward Communism. Communism “is the central experience of the first half of the 20th century.” It gives men “a reason to live and a reason to die.”

This insistence on men dying for their faith runs through the book. There seems to be no higher criterion

for either a man or a faith. Twice he quotes his assertion, made on a broadcast, that he still shares with Alger Hiss "the conviction that life is not worth living for which a man is not prepared to dare all and die at any moment." According to Chambers, a well-spent life seems to be a form of staggered suicide.

This is a peculiar attitude, since there has seldom been an absurd cause for which men have not been ready to die. Among those who are at all times ready to die can be found many whose lives aren't worth living. For the hard business of living is ordinarily one of paying for what we do with a different coin from that of our life—coins called work or success. Chambers has remained a frustrated Kamikaze—first in the cause of Communism, then in that of anti-Communism.

Non-Omnipotent God

Even what Chambers calls Communism bears little resemblance to what is generally known by this name. Communism, he says repeatedly, is based on faith in Man. Communism as previously known is based on faith neither in Man nor in Men, but in a total subjection to a merciless, undeviating history. Indeed, it is the mystical, irrevocable character of this subjection that has made many people reject their Communist allegiance.

Actually, Chambers, who is obsessed with the idea of Communism, underestimates its danger, for he sees it acting primarily as an underground conspiracy. But the tragedy of our time is that there are millions of men who embrace Communism to free themselves from some of the ills that torture them—and thus are enslaved. Not the spy or the secret agent, but the professional agitator, skillful in finding his work wherever there is human suffering, and in creating human suffering, represents the major threat to our society.

Chambers talks of God. Indeed, he has dedicated his life to God. God has spoken to him at least once. It was one day when he was coming down the stairs in his Mount Royal Terrace house in Baltimore. "As I stepped down into the dark hall, I found myself stopped, not by a constraint, but by a hush of my whole being. In this organic hush, a voice said with perfect distinctness: 'If you will fight for freedom, all will be well with you.'"

This sounds like one of those compacts which the first Patriarchs entered. But it is difficult to see how Chambers's god can keep his part of the compact, for he is a horribly weakened god, abandoned by large masses of men who have gone to the other side—the side which Chambers maintains is winning. There is not much hope to be found in this book that the trend may be reversed and that the attempt to stop Communism can be anything but a suicidal foray on the advancing conquerors. Yet, through Chambers, this god asks for the tribute of men ready to die. This mortally wounded Moloch is not the God of the Judeo-Christian faith.

In the whole book, Christ is hardly if ever mentioned, although the verbiage of Christian ethics and Christian charity is largely used. But the person as well as the meaning of Christ are not to be found anywhere—the respect for the human person that the Christian faiths consider sacred because Christ accepted human shape.

For it is true that the struggle of our time is a religious one: a struggle where various Molochs (called Communism or nationalism) stand against men's will to rule themselves and to maintain their communion with God through many churches or through no church—as Christ told the Samaritan woman. This faith in the human person, always meshed into politics yet somehow independent of it, has become the faith of our civilization, East and West, and is shared by hundreds of millions of baptized and unbaptized people.

It is faith in freedom. This unfortunate man Chambers has extremely vague notions of freedom. He says, "freedom is a need of the soul, and

nothing else." He does not know how freedom is organized and released, or what a system of law is, or how laws exert their checks on men's instincts. Indeed, not only the democracy of the New Deal but the idea of political freedom is alien to him.

Vacation from History

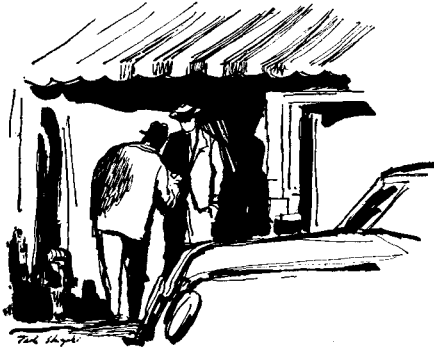
One night, when he was about to leave the Communist Party, he says, ". . . I faced the fact that, if Communism were evil, I could no longer serve it, and that that was true regardless of the fact that there might be nothing else to serve, that the alternative was a void." It was not just on that one night, that he faced the void which his education had not filled and which Communism could not cover up. What that void means is no values, no purpose, no design, no faith in life. The Russians have a word for it: nihilism.

There is so little hope left in Whitaker Chambers that whatever happens in his favor seems to him a freakish reprieve from doom. Chambers has no qualms about aligning himself with whatever institution or interests Communism fights. And why should he? Whatever Communism attacks is not destined to live long.

Nihilism, in his case and in that of some other former Communists, is what remains of the Marxist conception of history in the minds of men who still adhere to it but no longer want to be its agents. Since he refuses to be the tool of the inevitable, the nihilist enjoys a vacation from history. He can get a free ride on any forlorn counterattack against the inevitable.

Yet this unfortunate, lonely man is now offering millions of Americans the opportunity to relive, through his book,





his own life. Thanks to his profession and his native gift, he has acquired a remarkable power of communication. But what he can communicate is, above all, his nihilism, the lonely experience of his own self, of a man never entirely identified with anything, either Communism or God, and forced to replace all these accepted standards of value with his own homemade substitutes. He communicates to his fellow citizens universal distrust of their leaders, not a promise of salvation. But he does impart to them that thorough despair for which only the iron discipline of Communism can be a cure.

Other former Communists had already advanced the Rasputin-like theory that to fight Communism, which is the evil of our times, one must have been a practitioner of evil. But no one had ever gone as far as Whittaker Chambers. He still boasts of his attachment to some of the most typical Communist values. He even makes a plea for his onetime profession, spying: "Like the soldier, the spy stakes his freedom or his life on the chances of action."

He Who Pays

Constantly he exhibits, flagellates, ultimately extols himself. Constantly he makes it quite clear that whatever he has done to others, it is he who has suffered the most. His whole story is construed as a slow, tortured ascent, Chambers's immolation to what he is the witness for. This becomes particularly striking where he describes what he underwent while denouncing Hiss.

In answer to the question that a journalist put to him at the time, "What do you think you are doing?" he replies, "I am a man who, reluctantly, grudgingly, step by step, is destroying himself that this country and the faith by which it lives may continue to exist." When he decides not to de-

stroy the microfilms, he says, "I knew, too, that whatever else I destroyed, I could do what I had to do only if I was first of all willing to destroy myself." Later, when he considers suicide, he says, "Whether I lived and bore a witness of justice, or killed myself and bore a witness of mercy, I would in either case destroy myself."

Once, in answering Mr. Nixon, who had asked him about his motives in accusing Alger Hiss of Communism, he said, "There are in general two kinds of men. One kind of man believes that God is a God of Justice. The other kind of man believes that God is a God of Mercy. I am so constituted that in any question I will always range myself upon the side of mercy." He must have forgotten at that moment that there are also the Communists in



this world, who do not believe in God—either of Justice or of Mercy.

His last attempt at suicide, at the time he was testifying before the New York Grand Jury, he describes as having been at least partly successful. "Still, no one who has been through such an experience can be expected to be quite the same man again. He is both freer and stronger, because he is, ever after, less implicated in the world. For he has been, in his own mind at least, almost to the end of everything, and knows its worth."

In a chapter entitled "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow," the author makes it clear that there is not much of a tomorrow left for him. After the trials, there is not much energy left, either—aside from whatever energy might have been required for the writing of these 799 pages. At the end, the book has the inexorable accent of the *Consummatum Est*.

Without Fear or Malice

Just because this book is no ordinary piece of literature, but a very impor-

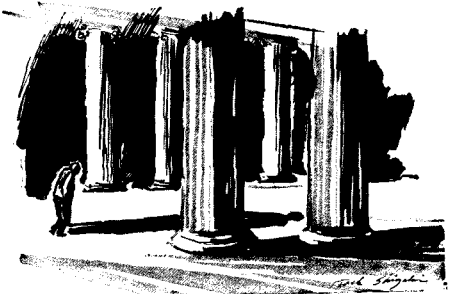
tant political fact, it is imperative that it be answered and not just reviewed. The episodes it reports may be all true. But the frame of reference and the perspective are, to say the least, arbitrary.

From the sense of doom, of inevitable Communist victory, only the enemy can benefit. Moreover, this pessimism is utterly unjustified, for in fact we are fighting against Communism and we certainly will win if we do not let nihilism becloud our vision and sap our strength.

IT is not possible to derive from this book any other sentiment than a profound pity for Whittaker Chambers. But all the accidents, the quirks, the oddities of his life cannot be considered representative and exemplary, even if his desperate loneliness is endowed with the power of communication—amplified by the *Saturday Evening Post* and the Book-of-the-Month Club. We do need to revise our recent history, for we can no longer rely on the happy improvisations that allowed Roosevelt's America to emerge from the depression and from the war. But these blanket indictments of all who have led us during the last twenty years, and of the democratic tenets our nation lives by, cannot remain unchallenged. Only too frequently of late the sewers have been overflowing into Main Street. Behind Chambers, anguished in his search for God, come Lait and Mortimer—and the rest.

Perhaps we ought to have less shyness and self-consciousness in asserting our religious beliefs. Our times are so serious, the fight against Communism so demanding, that we must call on all the support we can get from the faith that has made our civilization. We all have our share of guilt for the life that is described in this book, and we can never pity its author enough.

But we will not trade Christ for Chambers.



The Tragic Life Of a Polrugarian Minister

ISAAC DEUTSCHER

POLRUGARIA need not be exactly located on the map. Enough that it lies somewhere in the dark eastern reaches of Europe. Nor need the name of Vincent Adriano, a high Polrugarian official, be looked up in any *Who's Who*, for he is a half-real and half-imaginary character. Adriano's features and traits can be found in some of the people who now rule the Russian satellite countries, and not a single one of his experiences related here has been invented. It need not be specified what post Vincent Adriano holds in his Government. He may be the President or the Prime Minister or the Vice-Premier, or he may be only the Minister of the Interior or the Minister of Education. In all likelihood he is a member of the Politburo, and is known as one of the pillars of the People's Democracy in Polrugaria. His words and doings are reported in newspapers all over the world.

It is common to refer to men of Adriano's kind as "Stalin's henchmen," "Russian puppets," and "leaders of the Cominform fifth column." If any of these labels described him adequately, Adriano would not be worth any special attention. To be sure, he is unavoidably something of a puppet and an agent of a foreign power, but he is much more than that.

The Decay of a Social Order

Vincent Adriano is in either his late forties or early fifties—he may be just fifty. His age is significant because his formative years were those of the revolutionary aftermath of the First World War. He came from a middle-class family that before 1914 had enjoyed a measure of prosperity and believed in the stability of dynasties, governments, currencies, and moral principles. In his middle or late teens, Adriano saw three

It is only appropriate that, after telling the story of a man who left Communism, we recount the adventures of one who remains a Communist to this day. And we scarcely need add that the opinions of the Polrugarian Minister (as given by Mr. Deutscher), particularly those concerning the conflict between Communism and democracy, are not shared by this magazine—as the preceding article by our editor proves.

vast empires crumble with hardly anybody shedding a tear. Then he watched many governments leap into and tumble out of existence in so rapid and breathtaking a succession that it was almost impossible to keep account of them. On the average, there were a dozen or a score of them every year. The advent of each was hailed as an epoch-making event; each successive Prime Minister was greeted as a savior.

After a few weeks or days, he was booed and hissed out of office as a misfit, scoundrel, and nincompoop.

Two Boxes of Matches

The currency of Polrugaria, like the currencies of all neighboring countries, lost its value from month to month, then from day to day, and finally from hour to hour. Adriano's father sold his house at the beginning of one year; with the money he received he could buy only two boxes of matches at the end of that year. No political combination, no institution, no established custom, no inherited idea seemed capable of survival. Moral principles, too, were in flux. Reality seemed to lose clear-cut outline, and this was reflected in the new poetry, painting, and sculpture.

The young man was easily convinced that he was witnessing the decay of a social order, that before his

