

The Accuser and the Accused

Friendship and Fratricide: An Analysis of Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss, by Meyer A. Zeligs, M.D. (Viking, 476 pp. \$8.95), maintains that the famous trials resulted in the ruin of an innocent man by a psychopath with a compulsion to destroy. Mark Harris is professor of English at San Francisco State College and author of "Twenty-One Twice: A Journal."

By MARK HARRIS

MEYER A. ZELIGS describes his book as "a psychobiographical investigation into those regions of the protagonists' lives and minds that were beyond the scope of their own counsel and the courts to explore."

The protagonists were Whittaker Chambers, who is dead, and Alger Hiss, now sixty-two and a salesman in New York City. To Hiss *Friendship and Fratricide* may be largely welcome, for it is a persuasive exposition of the author's

thesis that he was a victim of Chambers's pathological need to destroy.

Why should we be astonished to be told this? Madness and obsession have been lately in the news. It is far easier, for me at least, to believe Dr. Zeligs's account of Chambers's compulsive destruction of Hiss than to believe that upon a single Chicago night one man murdered eight nurses.

Alger Hiss, according to Dr. Zeligs, was a man of high integrity, with a first-rate intellect and a proper respect for proper institutions. Testimony by responsible and highly-placed Americans held him to be generous, reliable, and singularly able. But he was also overly solicitous, an incurable "caretaker."

After his graduation from Johns Hopkins and Harvard Law School, Hiss served as a lawyer for the New Deal AAA and for the Nye Committee. Though he would have preferred to return to private practice, he became secretary general of the San Francisco Conference which wrote the United Nations Charter, and in 1947 he assumed the presidency of the Carnegie Endowment



—Wide World.

Whittaker Chambers—"man of mystery."



—Wide World.

Alger Hiss—"incurable caretaker"

Inhibitions to an Analytic Biography

I MADE CLEAR TO HISS at the outset, as I had in similar letters to Chambers and to all the others I planned to interview, that my projected study was to be an analytic biography. It was not my intent to confirm the guilt or establish the innocence of Hiss. I pointed out to Hiss the necessity of having no restrictions in the gathering of background material pertaining to all aspects of his life, private and public, personal and political. Despite a deep-seated aversion to talking about himself, Hiss agreed to these stipulations.

My study of Chambers' life took a different tack. Despite my repeated efforts, Chambers refused to see me. He would not answer my letters or phone calls. Attempts to contact him through mutual friends proved equally unsuccessful . . . even from Chambers' Baltimore attorneys I failed to get a response. Their opinions are therefore absent from this study.

Chambers' silence stands in ironic contrast to the cooperation of Hiss. Chambers' account of his personal life has been widely publicized: in his testi-

mony at many Congressional hearings, in the two trials, and in his autobiography; yet he would not speak to me privately. Hiss, who has insisted that the Hiss case is distinct from Hiss, the person, and who has confined his public utterances strictly to legal facts, has willingly related the details of his personal and political life.

After Whittaker Chambers' death on July 9, 1961 (two years after I began my study), many sources of information opened up. Informants, unwilling to relate their past experiences while Chambers was still alive, now provided me with anecdotal and documentary material. I sought out Chambers' friends, former classmates, colleagues, professors, political associates (ex-Communists, fellow travelers, leftists, and rightists); also journalists, editors, physicians, literary associates, and many others. Most related to me freely, and some reluctantly, what they remembered about him. There were those who doubted him and those who believed in him implicitly; many were awed by his literary knowledge and fascinated by

his experience and intrigues. He was variously admired, distrusted, held in contempt. But all who had any dealings with him shared a common feeling: Whittaker Chambers was a man of mystery. Even in the minds of the politically astute, he remains to this day a misunderstood figure. Despite the extent of his political and personal intrigues and despite his success as a journalist, Whittaker Chambers led an isolated and secretive existence. . . . This book therefore lacks the added dimension his personal participation would have provided. . . . Whatever imbalance it contains I have carefully left untouched. It remains, I hope, not the measure of my own leanings, but an essential dimension of the analytic biographer in his endeavor to encompass in full scope the deeply contrasting life styles of his two subjects.

IF WE EXAMINE THE PASSAGES from *Witness* . . . we see that they are enactments of familiar patterns in Chambers' emotional life. Chambers becomes romantically attached to a friend, then envy

for International Peace. As he could not resist appeals for personal help, so he could not resist the idea of helping the world.

In Dr. Zelig's view, Chambers's life was ruled from beginning to end by relentless psychic conflict, a recurrent pattern of love-hate, envy, and destruction. He was early estranged from his neurotic parents. He felt responsible for his brother's suicide, and was burdened by guilt that he had neither saved him nor joined him in the death pact he claimed his brother had suggested. Chambers repeatedly sought to "resurrect" his brother and then to "kill" him again. Alger Hiss was the last of a long line of surrogate brothers met, exploited, and betrayed.

The psychological strains under which Chambers labored required him to alter his name and his identity regularly, and Dr. Zelig, physician turned detective, traces the succession of changes at length, with full documentation. Chambers lived under many names in many places, falsified many documents, and created and recreated his own history as a means of inventing an identity acceptable to him. Conversely, he projected upon other people, especially those he victimized, his own numerous flaws: he was reportedly alcoholic, homosexual, thief, and defaulting debtor.

At his high school graduation ceremony Chambers delivered the class prophecy, in which he predicted that a

girl classmate would become a prostitute. She was the first of many victims. Inflicting various degrees of damage, Chambers subsequently slandered or blackmailed college friends, fellow-workers, and political associates, as well as "dead, deported, or mythical persons." All this was a part of "the fictionalization of his own reality." And indeed, Dr. Zelig's explication of Chambers's prose, poetry, and literary translations reveals, among other things, startling prefigurations of the relationship with Hiss.

In 1948 Hiss was publicly named by Whittaker Chambers as having been a leader of the Communist "apparatus" in Washington during the mid-Thirties. Hiss denied the charges, asserting that he had never known anyone named Whittaker Chambers. He eventually recognized his accuser as one George Crosley, a free-lance writer whom he had assisted in small ways more than a decade earlier.

Hiss promptly sued for libel. The process led to his being tried twice for perjury. The second and decisive trial concentrated finally upon documents allegedly passed from Hiss to Chambers, and claimed to have been written on a Woodstock typewriter once owned by Hiss.

The possibilities, now or ever, of real certainty concerning the documents or the typewriter are remote. A main service of Dr. Zelig's book is its directing our attention along the right lines: far from deepening the futile cloak-and-dagger mystery, it deepens instead our wonder and awe. If the mechanics of courtroom justice failed, it was because the jurors could not believe that Chambers's charges could be lies: no man would tell such things about another without some basis; somewhere there must be motive.

But where? "The many episodes in [Chambers's] itinerant and vagabond existence were linked in a long chain of clinical evidence presented by [Hiss's] counsel to show Chambers's sociopathic personality." The prosecution derided this evidence of motive because "you can't see" the imaginative workings of the mind. The defense psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Binger, reminded of "his legal limitations as a witness," attempted to explain that he had been "trained to include . . . not to exclude," but the court was skeptical and the jurors more so.

Hiss's legal defeat had the effect of freezing the public memory of the case. He entered contemporary history as the archetypical traitor, Chambers as the repentant patriot. The view was reinforced by Chambers's *Witness*, published in 1952, the factual distortions and psychological defenses of which Dr. Zelig analyzes extensively.

As knowledge overtakes our age, the invisible becomes increasingly visible.

Hidden or unconscious passions are as real as assassin's bullets. And as we move farther away from the political atmosphere of 1949 the vindication of Alger Hiss becomes more probable. Toward that end this "psychobiography" irresistibly leads, for Dr. Zelig's care and labor must win the respect of open minds capable of including the invisible.

Ever Since Greencastle

By Naomi Lazard

EVER since Greencastle
where I boarded the train,
crossing the bed of foamflowers
that slept beside the shed,
I have played a part, I have brazened
it out in the gentian gardens, the
cafeteria,
the auditorium, everywhere.
I was none too steady after the fruit
punch.
The girl on the coin winked twice
as I dressed for dinner at eight and the
reception.
Thank you, thank you all. No applause
please.
Having seen you once I didn't dare
to turn my head, those bees swarmed
out of your eyes.
I fastened mine on my book
all about the new mathematics.
But you touched me first with a hot bee
pressed
to the small of my back, sent my shivers
of nerves
humming like quick black birds
in a dangerous sky. Later you said,
"But I saw you at Greencastle. You
looked proud."
Proud! I saw us lying together on some
enormous shore,
folded like leaves that have spun
down in a draft, lulled by the low
sounds of gulls
and our names forgotten.
But you were always so far away.
I turned to discover the slope of your
neck
bending toward someone else.
I smiled on my imaginary stage,
performed in the spot of an amber lens.
And you. You were cornered, I presume,
back to the wall and swollen with
success.
Barbecued on their hot smiles.
Ah, my well done turned to perfection
morsel,
who is the white lamb, who
the ravenous one that blessed the fire?
We lifted a departing toast
to our separate ways, and as if in a
dream
I remember our only silence.
How we turned face to face
in the cruellest part of the night.
How we curled to each other
with never a sound to save us.

and resentment set in, followed by contempt. Hiss and Chambers are linked by a deep "bond," a "tacit esteem of character," they share a "simplicity of taste, a gentleness of character." But Hiss is not Chambers' equal, we are to understand, in intellect; not equal to the minds Chambers grew up with, not interested in ideas, not even interested in Shakespeare. Then Hiss's character itself—praised before for its gentleness—comes under attack: it contains a streak of "cruelty" and "savagery." That underlying meanness is turned on Chambers himself: Hiss reproaches Chambers for his uncared-for teeth; Chambers is victimized, and he forgives Hiss. It is evident that this passage, like all of *Witness*, works for Chambers' self-glorification. He portrays himself as noble in spirit: noble, in his generous praise of Hiss's character, in his appreciation of the friendship, and in his tolerance of Hiss's shortcomings (anti-intellectualism and savagery). If we believe Chambers, he cannot lose.

—From "Friendship and Fratricide."