The Communist Conspiracy:

Story of Lash, 'Reformed' Red, and Help Mrs. F. D. Gave Him

This is the seventh of a series of articles by Robert E. Stripling on the Communist conspiracy in the United States. Stripling was chief investigator for the House un-American activities committee from 1938 to 1948. The articles were edited by Bob Considine, Times-Herald and International News Service columnist.

By ROBERT E. STRIPLING

THE House committee on un-American activities would have preferred never to hear again the name of Joe Lash, head of the Communist-controlled American Student union.

But there seemed no way by which we could escape him, even after he recanted and splintered away from his former creed.

A little more than a year after the Hitler-Stalin pact was signed, creating real disorder among U. S. Communists attempting to learn the new party line, Lash apparently informed Mrs. Roosevelt that he had repented his past associations with the Reds.

Selective service had come into being—passing by a single vote—and Lash, unmarried and in good physical condition, was eligible for the draft. Mrs. Roosevelt believed he was fine timber for a commission in naval intelligence. But the Navy department, though it was commissioning many civilians at that stage of the preparedness program, refused to accept Lash. White House inquiries met with a consistent answer: Lash could not be considered until the un-American activities committee gave his loyalty a clean bill of health.

Orders from Mrs. F. D.

One afternoon I was phoned by a secretary of Mrs. Roosevelt, calling from her office in the office of civilian defense, where Lash was at that time employed as an adviser.

"Mrs. Roosevelt wants to see you at 4 o'clock this afternoon," the secretary said.

"Why me?" I asked. "And what about?"

"You be there and you'll see."

I told her that since this must concern committee business I would have to consult committee chairman Martin Dies.

"You just be there," the girl reiterated, and hung up.

I called Dies to tell him of the curious command and he became quite angry with me. He seemed hurt because the call had not come to him. But when one did come to him, later that day and from the same secretary, he decided not to accept the invitation.

The late Mrs. Evelyn Walsh McLean, a frequent hostess of Mr. and Mrs. Dies, changed the congressman's mind. She told him it was rude to neglect to answer the call of the First Lady. So Dies phoned Mrs. Roosevelt the next day, and a luncheon date at the White House was set.

Demands Lash Be Cleared

At the conclusion of the luncheon, attended also by Lash and a former president of Smith college, Mrs. Roosevelt quickly reached the point. Lash, she said, had seen the errors of his ways and must no longer be allowed for the mistakes of youth. His record should be cleared at a committee hearing as soon as possible.

Dies called Lash several days later, apparently to the surprise of the Republican members of the committee. The reformed youth leader was heard in executive session. He admitted being a national committeeman of the American League Against War and Fascism; membership in its successor, the American Student for Peace and Democracy; membership in the American Student Union as well as the American Youth Congress.

He admitted further that he had written a number of pamphlets, which at that time was the party line—as, whenever the writer Dalton Trumbo's pamphlet reached "Among Gun Men."

Lash Gives Redemption

The Republican members of the committee then said to Lash that in view of his almost renunciation, he probably would now assist the committee by offering information on the workings of the front organizations to which he had belonged. Lash grew quite indignant. He informed the committee that he was not before them "in the role of stool pigeon." He was reminded in turn that it was obvious to be making a considerable fuss in naval intelligence on the one hand and, on the other, refusing to shed light on a conspiracy against the United States. But he would not budge, and after he left the room Rep. Thomas moved a suspension to the press that Lash be drafted.

The following day a Negro messenger arrived at Dies' office with a letter from Mrs. Roosevelt, accusing him of a disservice. An answer was signed for, but Dies made none.

White House Guest Often

Lash was inducted into the Army and assigned to meteorological work at nearby Bolling field. He continued to be a frequent White House guest, and was present at the memorable dinner the President gave for Prime Minister Churchill and their military advisers on the Christmas after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The committee's work continued in more important fields. We made public the names, positions and salaries of 140 permanent employes located in Washington who were members of the American League for Peace and Democracy. We made an exhaustive search into the workings of 10 CIO unions and obtained sufficient evidence to prosecute them (for the first time) Communist-ridden. They were:

The National Maritime Union, United Cannery, Packing and Allied Workers, Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Electricians, Fur Workers International Union, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Transport Workers Union, United Office and Professional Workers Union, American Communications Association, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, and the United Furniture Workers of America.

Finds Are Confirmed

The committee's findings long since have been confirmed.

At about this same time in the life of the committee two events took place which were to ignite tremendous controversy nearly a decade later.

The first event was visible to but though none of us caught its significance at the time. In December, 1939, the committee located and questioned a Negro named William Odell Nowell, of Detroit.

Nowell, a former Communist trusted with carrying messages back and forth between this country and Moscow, testified at length on the scope of the Red conspiracy. In naming other Americans and American visitors he had worked with, he testified:

"... Also in Moscow I met a Mr. Gebhardt, who was from the German Communist party. He was a German by birth . . . but in recent years he had been interested in and working on American problems.

"So he had worked with the American Commission of the Communist International. He traveled through America in 1932 and a portion of 1934. I believe I met him in 1933. As a representative of the Comintern he traveled under the alias of Edwards."

Chambers' Exposes

I would ask the reader to remember these dates.

The other event of 1939 which later had tremendous effect on the committee took place obscurely and without our notice.

An ex-Communist courier's confidence in his former ideology had been rudely shaken by the Stalin-Hitler pact. Forty-eight hours after it was signed, he came quietly to a decision which—in time—shook the entire United States. He made up his mind to expose his past and the activities of those with whom he had associated.

His name was David Whittaker Chambers.

(TOMORROW: Mr. Stripling receives an unsigned draft notice.)

INDEXED - 137
100-50914-A
NOT RECORDED
73 MAR 26 1949

This clipping is from the morning edition of The Washington Times Herald
2-5-49
Date