Chapter Three

Back in Canada

The 1930s was truly a Golden Era for Canadian Communists. For people too young to remember and without relatives to remind them, it comes as quite a shock to learn that there was a time when the Communist Party of Canada really mattered to the working class of this country.

Golden Era Of Canadian Communism

"How can workers build socialism if they aren't able to fight against oppressive conditions under capitalism?" the Communists asked. "How can an unorganized working class make a revolution?" So they went about organizing the working class and battled for immediate needs. This approach, developed in the 1920s, but with little effect until the devastating conditions of the 1930s, clearly distinguished the Communist Party of Canada from earlier Marxist parties. Rather than leading workers in day-to-day industrial and social struggles, all the earlier parties had been absorbed in "educating the masses" by introducing them to the ideas of the masters.

The Communists were much more a party of action. As part of the International Day Against Unemployment, they had distributed over a hundred thousand leaflets and brought over 75,000 Canadians onto the streets on 25 February 1931. A few months later they presented Prime Minister Bennett and his Minister of Labour, Gideon Robertson, with 100,000 signatures demanding the immediate enactment of non-contributory unemployment insurance, to which Bennett had answered: "No government with which I am associated will ever agree with this.... We will not put a premium on idleness."1

On 11 August 1931, party headquarters, the offices of the Workers Unity League, the party newspaper, and the homes of every member of the party's
Political Bureau were raided and ransacked, and the entire leadership of the Party arrested and charged with being members of an unlawful association under Section 98 of the Criminal Code. The judge sentenced eight leaders to five years imprisonment and in November of that year, Ontario's attorney general announced on the radio that "Communism will never raise its head in Ontario again." Prime Minister R.B. Bennett asked "every true Canadian to put the iron heel of ruthlessness against a thing of that sort."

The Communists were a target. But they were a tiny group. The real targets, they knew, were the much larger movement of the unemployed. In 1932, nearly half a million people signed the Canadian Labour Defence League's petition to free the Kingston Eight and by 1934 public pressure finally convinced the government to free Tim Buck and the others. No less than 17,000 people filled Maple Leaf Gardens to applaud Tim Buck's release from jail. That year there were few major centres in Canada where Tim Buck could not outdraw the Prime Minister.

By 1932 Party members had set up 45 Unemployment Councils across Canada — including in the Relief Camps where they held study sessions on "slave labour." Their trade union arm, the Workers' Unity League, had set up eleven industrial unions and thirty union locals by 1933. As noted by labour historian Irving Abella, the WUL was the only labour centre in Canada committed to organizing not only the unorganized but the unemployed as well, and it was the only one willing to use the strike as a weapon against both employers and governments. Of the 189 strikes in 1934, no less than 109 were fought under the leadership of the WUL. Years later, Communist leader Tim Buck could say without exaggeration that "the long established tradition ... that workers can't be organized in bad times was shown to be false." It was also the case that, as he said, "the only strikes won by the workers during the crisis years, were led by the WUL."

In 1935 the Communists organized the On-to-Ottawa Trek on behalf of the single unemployed. They elected members to the Ontario and Manitoba legislatures, to city hall, and to school boards in Toronto, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Vancouver, and elsewhere. When Communists won a majority of municipal council seats in the coal mining town of Blairmore, Alberta, one of their first acts was to change the name of the main street to Tim Buck Boulevard! They organized the League Against War and Fascism and the Canadian Youth Congress, established Friends of the Soviet Union, promoted the Progressive Arts Club and the Workers' Sports League, performed agit prop theatre in the streets, published the literary magazine, New Frontiers, and a children's magazine, Always Ready. They sent 1,280 volunteers to fight fascism in Spain, formed the Fifteenth International Brigade, the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, and they raised funds for Dr. Norman Bethune's blood transfusion unit there. And much, much more.
The CCF was their natural rival, competing as they did for the support of Canadians fed up with the way the capitalist system was treating them. The CCF was founded in 1932, an amalgam of farm groups, labor organizations, and intellectuals not too different from that of the Communist Party. From the beginning its membership was far larger than that of the Communist Party and its electoral success, while slow in coming, was immeasurably greater. Its program, laid out in the Regina Manifesto, was at least as radical-sounding and much more elegant than anything the Communists had turned out. It promised to “replace the present capitalist system, with its inherent injustice and inhumanity, by a social order from which the domination and exploitation of one class by another will be eliminated, in which economic planning will supersede unregulated private enterprise and competition, and in which genuine democratic self-government, based on economic equality will be possible.” All of this was to be achieved by way of the electoral process. As already noted, the Communists participated in elections too, but they believed that people became radicalized not by listening to speeches or reading articles or voting, but by organizing themselves and others and engaging in actions, small and large, that defended human rights and challenged the rights of capital.

It was rarely what they said that attracted people to the Party. They were dogmatic, sectarian, and arrogant. They slavishly followed every twist and turn of the Soviet party, revising, reversing, and contorting their own politics to conform to Stalin’s latest dictum. It was what they did that convinced thousands to join the movement. They were everywhere, these 1930s Communists, everywhere people were being exploited or oppressed. No issue was out of bounds. Their energy seemed without limit. And their efforts sometimes succeeded. The five dollar voucher that paid the cost of food for a family going hungry, the bag of coal for one shivering in the mid-winter cold, medicines for the sick, better food in the work camps, or the removal of an insulting welfare official.

Small victories, perhaps, but not to these revolutionaries. As far as they were concerned, each time they walked on a picket line, handed out a leaflet, sold a newspaper, attended a meeting, marched in a demonstration, or recruited a new member, they were remaking the world.

What they lacked in numbers and popular support they offset by cohesiveness and a common outlook. Oblivious to the slings and arrows of the Philistines, they believed that very soon the class struggle would enlighten all the masses and bring them over to the cause. They believed they were the chosen people. Christians had God on their side, but Marxists had History. Their abiding faith in Communism, in the Soviet Union, in the international Communist movement, and in the principles of Marxism-Leninism, seemed to immunize them from all criticism. Every 24 hours
seemed to send the pulse of the world racing towards the Marxist revolution. The worse things got, the closer the imminent socialist explosion!

Waiting For Cook

The Polish liner carrying the Wolofskys sliced its way into the estuary of the St. Lawrence in October 1933. Looking across the miles of cold water to the barren hills of northern Québec, Moishe wondered what it would be like seeing his mother, Sammy, Miriam, and the other Wolofsky children.

The river narrowed. The ship rounded the Isle d’Orléans, stopped to let off passengers at Québec, and an hour later set out for Montréal. As Moishe walked the deck after dinner, the parish lights on both sides of the river were clearly visible. As he looked at the moonlit feudal strips leading down to the river, it suddenly occurred to him how little he knew about this country, even though he lived in it for eighteen years. How would it be living in Montréal again? Would he stay here for long? What work would he do? How would Cook make contact with him?

On the way to 91 Esplanade, Moishe moved along busy St. Lawrence with its noises, its commerce, and sights of shuffling unemployed. Lean and hungry men around Montréal’s ship docks scrounged food from the unloading boats. The Great Depression had reached its darkest depths. On any single day, one out of every four Canadians sat idle. In Montréal, one out of three received some form of relief.

“You felt the Depression in your bones and marrow,” wrote the poet Irving Layton, who grew up in Montréal. Walking down The Main in those years, “you felt the hopelessness and the pain, the bewilderment and panic. The gilt put on during the boom years had rubbed off. From the storefronts and houses, from the sidewalks and asphalt streets, the shine was peeling away. Everywhere there was evidence of decay …. Soon the neighbourhood became dotted with soup kitchens and columns of people lining up to receive their daily meal.”

Unemployment insurance was non-existent and relief payments, mainly vouchers rather than cash, were administered by municipalities to unemployed married people. Single men and women had to fend for themselves. Petty bureaucrats meting out the dole seemed to share Prime Minister Bennett’s view that people without work were “idlers” who must pay the penalty for their “idleness.”

Panhandling transients cluttered city streets, standing in line at Salvation Army hostels and religious missions and gathering around fires under bridges to keep out of the cold and the rain. They rode the rails from city to city in search of jobs, but found company-employed bulls guarding the
freight trains. Local police, under orders from tax-starved municipalities, ran them out of town, or stuck them in jail. For food, lodging, and twenty cents a day, single homeless men could enter specially constructed relief camps to construct roads, bridges, harbours, airfields, and historic sites. It was the government's answer to unemployment. Single women could become domestic servants for about the same pay.

Moishe was hardly thrilled to be back on the Esplanade. He had conquered new worlds, but nothing on Esplanade seemed changed. He was anxious to see Sarah, who was delighted to have her favourite son home again. Sammy and Miriam sat at his feet, absorbing his every word, thrilled to hear his stories. Sammy was already a convert to the cause and a voracious reader. Within weeks he consumed all the pamphlets Moishe brought back with him.

Not long after the arrival, visitors began converging on the Wolofsky home, including Moe's friends, Albert Marcus and George Ehrlich. Moishe regaled them with stories, they responded with questions, endless questions. How was Moe? What was it like to work in a Soviet factory? Who were his friends? What did he eat? Had he seen Joe Stalin? Are the Russian people really happy under socialism? What about the Jews? Intellectuals? Peasants?

Herschel Wolofsky wrote a series of articles for *The Eagle* about his trip to Poland and meeting his son in Russia. *The Eagle*'s star reporter prepared a series on Moishe's experiences in the USSR. Some were translated and appeared in Montréal's daily press. Within weeks Moishe became something of a local celebrity, inundated with invitations to speak at the YMCA, Junior Chamber of Commerce, the University, and to women's groups.

One of the first invitations came from the Young People's Socialist League, a youth wing of the CCF. Many of the leading lights of the CCF were in the audience that day. They included David Lewis, just returned from England where he had been sent as a Rhodes Scholar. Lewis had quickly earned for himself a reputation as a brilliant debater in England, comparable, so it was said, to the awesome Labour Member of Parliament Nye Bevan. Also present in the audience were Eugene Forsey and Frank Scott of McGill University, moving forces in the League for Social Reconstruction, an association of left-wing intellectuals that drafted the Regina Manifesto.

"I prepared myself well," Bill recalled. "I planned to appeal to the idealism of the Young Socialists without giving away my own commitment to Communism. I told them some of the stories and explained about conditions in Russia, playing light on the problems and conflicts and emphasizing the strides being taken to overcome the hardships and poverty. And I ended up my speech with the story about the time Moe and I had visited a Red Army battalion on our second May Day in Russia,"
concluding with the oath of the Red Army: ‘I pledge my life unto death for socialism and the international brotherhood of all mankind’.

“The audience was impressed, but a few of them expressed doubts, saying that it couldn’t have been all that positive. David Lewis was among the doubters and he asked whether I had joined the Communist Party while I was there? ‘No,’ I answered, which was barely the truth since I had in fact joined the Young Communist League. Lewis wasn’t satisfied. He said, ‘I for one can’t believe after what I’ve heard you say, after spending two years over there, that you would come back a political virgin.’ I could only shrug him off.”

Lewis, a founding member of the Yipsels in Canada, was not at all fooled. He was entirely aware of what Moishe was up to. As he once noted about those days, the Yipsel “was resolutely anti-Communist in an area of Montreal where the Communist Party and the Young Communist League enjoyed their greatest popularity.” At the conclusion of the meeting, Albert Marcus introduced Moishe to Forsey and Scott. They invited him to their rooms at McGill. But these socialist intellectuals held no interest for Moishe. They talked a different language. He dismissed them as quickly as they ended up dismissing him.

An anxious month passed in which Moishe waited impatiently to make contact with the Party in order to rejoin the movement. But he had made a pledge to both his father and to the Comintern so he sat tight and worked at The Eagle.

Thirty days passed with still no sign of Cook. On the 32nd day, however, a caretaker in The Eagle building told him that a Mr. Baker wanted to see him. “Oh, what about?” Moishe asked. “I don’t know but it’s very important. He wants to make arrangements.” “But I don’t know anybody by that name. It must be a mistake,” thought Moishe. Days later he thought, “Baker - Cook — there must be a mix-up in the translation. That’s my man.” But the caretaker informed him that Baker had left for Toronto. “You said you didn’t want to see him.”

**The Montréal Artists’ Group**

Until now he had avoided all contact with Party members although some had tried to catch him. Among others, Lea Roback, a Montréal social worker, invited him to a social in her home. At first he declined, thinking that she might be a party person and pressure him to join. Then he decided that he had no choice. He had to get back to Baker. Moishe found a lively group at Lea Roback’s home, mostly artists, writers, and actors, and he felt
right at home. The same portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin lined the walls. And the crowd reminded him of Muriel Altman and her friends in Moscow.

Lea Roback's story was similar in some ways to Moishe's own. Born in Québec City, she went to study in Paris and Berlin. There she joined the Communist Party but returned to Canada in 1932, having barely escaped Hitler's roundup. She took a job at the Young Women's Hebrew Association, but Lea was a natural organizer and fluent in French, Yiddish, and German, so the party sent her to help organize garment workers and she became director of education of the WUL's Needle Workers' Industrial Union. Later, when the WUL disbanded, she was hired by the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union.

Besides Lea, he met Dorothy Livesay, the young Winnipeg-born poet employed in Montréal as a social worker; Bassia Zelman, director of the Montréal Repertory Theatre; the painter Louis Muhlstock; Cecil-Smith, editor of the newly-formed Masses magazine visiting from Toronto; Stanley Ryerson, that black sheep of the famous Ontario family, who would soon teach at Sir George Williams University and, under the pseudonym Etienne Roger, give courses at the anti-Catholic Université Ouvrières.

The conversation resembled the talk at Muriel's apartment too: the economic crisis, collectivization, the renegade Trotsky, the Five-Year Plan, socialist realism, and so on. Most were involved in agit-prop theatre, performing in labour halls, on the backs of trucks, in pubs, anywhere they could find an audience — their themes always political: unemployment, anti-war, civil liberties. The talk centered on a new play written by Oscar Ryan called "Eight Men Speak." It was about the arrest and imprisonment of the eight leaders of the Party still sitting in Kingston Penitentiary.

Dorothy Livesay read her new poem, "An Immigrant (Nick Zynchuk)," about an unemployed worker, Nick Zynchuk, who a few months earlier had been helping a family about to be evicted when he was shot in the back by the police and killed. His funeral attracted 10,000 people, one of the biggest demonstrations in Montréal's history. The procession was blocked by a company of police on horseback. From the back, a phalanx of plain clothes police flailed away with wooden clubs, cursing the mourners, bashing them and knocking many down until the funeral ground to a halt.

"An Immigrant"
Deep in St. Louis Ward soft winds caress
The huddled houses, spring returns again.
The winter's gone, and no one's paid the rent:
The couple upstairs went to jail, and Nick
Here's Nick again, his pockets empty still.
We've appealed to the landlord, then to City Hall;
We've appealed to our candidate for alderman.
Tomorrow the day is set, we go, wife -
Unless the neighbours help us fight it through.
Click click click. "Attention men."
The sargeant's at his words again.
"All right, Zappa - take this whiskey,
Use your billies if they're frisky,
See? They're bastards, not fit to live,
Give 'em all you've got to give."
The crowd held firm. Then a single cry went up
As the furniture came out. Now working-men
Stood shoulder to shoulder; silent, tense -
Until policemen charged, beat back, and struck.
Then you returned again, newcomer here,
Unknown and unobserved. What you had left,
A few possessions — trouser and hat,
they're still upstairs in an old travelling bag.
You moved towards the door, towards the stair
And scarcely noticed Zappa standing there.
The crowd stirred restlessly. You passed
There was a roar and pistol crack.
Nothing had happened in the street -
Only a worker was shot in the back.

"This is all very well," Moishe said to himself, "but I'm still no closer to Baker." He approached the chairman of the Party in Québec, pint-sized Fred Rose, just released from jail. "Say," he said in a friendly fashion, "I was supposed to be visited by a guy named Baker a few days back. Do you know anything about it?" "Baker? He was here. He went back to Toronto," Rose replied. "Baker," it turns out, was Stewart Smith. "Look, I've got to see him. When will he be here again?" "Not for a while, but don't worry. We'll get word to you."

Moishe was anxious to join the Party. He had already been invited to do so by several of the people he had met. But since he considered himself to be under Party discipline, he felt he could do nothing until he received new instructions. A few more weeks passed and there was still no word.

Friends Of The Soviet Union

Confused and at his wits end, Moishe finally approached Sydney Sarkin, a known Party man who also happened to be a neighbour of the Wolofskys. Sarkin, only a few years older than Moishe, was already a Party veteran and an organizer of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers. Moishe
admired Syd Sarkin — a working-class intellectual, modest, scholarly, but without pretense.

"What do you advise me to do, Syd? You know the way the Party works here."

After a few minutes’ reflection, Syd replied, "You know our party’s illegal now. You can do more good working on the outside with Friends of the Soviet Union. The FSU is being set up all around the world. You could help establish a branch in Montréal. I can put you in touch with Louis Kon who is in charge of the FSU. You’ll like Louis."

Moishe considered. "That’s not what I had in mind, but if you advise it, I guess it’s okay." He found Louis Kon to be a fascinating character. Kon, dressed in the tsar’s uniform, had joined the wave of strikes during the 1905 Russian uprising. A few years later he emigrated to Canada and settled in Winnipeg as immigration and colonization officer for the Grand Trunk Railway. Transferred to Montréal, he acted as the unofficial representative of the USSR in Canada. Up to this point, Canada had still not given official recognition to the Socialist regime and the Friends of the Soviet Union wished to hasten that recognition. Moishe found Kon warm, interesting, and interested. He was well-read and cultured, a mentor to many who went on to become political activists including Dr. Norman Bethune, Dorothy Livesay, and the economist Eric Adams.

"I helped Kon set up offices, produce literature and arrange some meetings," Bill related. "And there I met my first real love. I’ll call her Ruth. She was an artist. She was sent in by the Party to work with me and God, I fell in love with her. It was one of those terrible, heart-breaking things because she was married. That was one of the main reasons why I knew I couldn’t stay in Montréal."

Most of the people attending the meetings sponsored by the Friends of the Soviet Union were party members or sympathizers, but curiosity about the Soviet experiment was spreading. The Depression sapped public confidence in the free enterprise system because capitalism clearly wasn’t working and people began to think that socialism might be the answer.

“One evening,” Bill related, “I remember receiving a telephone call from a man who identified himself as Russell Greenberg. He asked whether we could meet. He was about my age, slim and dark. He talked about the unemployment situation, 30 per cent at the time, and that it was being blamed on the Jews and the Communists. Said something about the Archbishop of Montréal calling the CCF agents of Soviet Communism and that the Jean Baptiste society was trying to get a Jewish intern thrown out of the hospital and that they were claiming the Jews were robbing the French Canadians of their place as shop keepers. ‘I’m worried,’ he said. ‘Look, I’m a Jew too. I’m lucky, I’m managing a Woolworth department
Back in Canada

store here. The only Jew in such a position. But I know I could handle a much bigger operation. I could manage a whole chain of Woolworth stores. But they'll never give me that chance. Now you've been to Russia. What I want to know is do they have big department stores there and can Jews like myself get jobs managing them?"

"Now I had been asked that kind of question before, so I remember my answer. It was basically the same one given to me by the Comintern: 'I know what you are talking about,' I said, 'they don't discriminate against Jews in Russia, but they don't have chains of department stores there like we do here. In any case, if you want to build a better life for yourself, you have to work for it. We can't live off the revolution they made in Russia. Sure, it's better there and getting better each passing day, but our job is to make things better here'."

"I don't remember how he took it, but I don't believe he went to Russia then. In fact a few years later he went to fight on the side of the loyalists in the Spanish Civil War and years later I met this Russell Greenberg again, only this time his name was Ross Russell, and he was National Director of the organization of the United Electrical Workers' union."

How Moishe Wolofsky Became Bill Walsh

It was around that time Moishe changed his name to Bill Walsh. The Toronto FSU had asked him to write some articles for its magazine. He needed a pseudonym. For his father's sake he wanted to keep the name Wolofsky out of the public limelight. As it happened, an old school chum, Gus Sherman and another friend, Bill Siegel, team up with him to write the article. Moishe decided to collapse their names with his and comes up with William G. Walsh. It was the name he would take with him to Toronto a few months later.

The world swirled around him but, not being an active part of it, he felt unable to respond. In his very own neighbourhood there were at least five widely read Communist papers — in French, English, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish. Socialists, anarchists, and Communists of all persuasions met daily at Horn's Café and debated regularly at Prince Arthur Hall. The dressmakers were on strike, the first large strike of low-paid French-Canadian workers, with 125 shops in the garment district closed. Four thousand men and women lined the street, forming a column a mile long in a massive show of strength.

Bill also watched as massive world pressure won an acquittal for George Dimitrov, the Bulgarian Communist leader, charged with having started the fire that burned down the Reichstag building just twenty days after
Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. He fumed as the government banned the performance of “Eight Men Speak” in Toronto, upon the advice of Toronto’s infamous Red Squad. Thirty-six hundred people jammed Toronto’s Massey Hall to protest the arrest of A.E. Smith, head of the Canadian Labour Defence League.

Every 24 hours seemed to indicate an impending world revolution. Bill could feel it in his bones. He didn’t want to miss a second of it. Besides, this double life had become increasingly uncomfortable and he was tired of coming up with lame excuses as to why he hadn’t joined the Party when asked to do so by his new friends. Besides, Herschel was pushing him to take a more active role in The Eagle.

For Bill Walsh work on the “outside” was unimportant. Real life was in the Party. But working for the Party in Montréal would create an impossible situation for his father. Herschel already complained about his and Sammy’s activities. He heard of Moishe’s work for the FSU and suspected his son’s continuing conviction for the cause. “So you haven’t given up working for future glory?” Hershel asked. “You’re like the pious Jew who gives up joys on this earth so he may enjoy the glories of the World to Come. You want the applause of posterity?”

“I’ve already told you,” Bill responded, “for what I do I don’t expect to be remembered. I look for the satisfaction of being right, of being on the side of progress.”

“But why should you worry about it? I can understand a worker being radical. What has he got to lose? I can even understand a Lenin or a Stalin. They leap from obscurity to fame. But you and Sammy will never be a Lenin or a Stalin. What drives you to this silly agitation?”

“We have seen where history is leading. We know which is the right side. When you see the right thing, you must either fight for it or go to pieces. When you don’t see what is right and true you can chase after money, women or glory, or whatever. But if you see it and do not support it, you become corrupt. Besides, I’m only following your example. I’ve seen how you stand up to the Uptowners. I’m only doing in my field what you’ve spent a life-time doing in yours.”

Of course Herschel would never be persuaded. Now he had Sydney Sarkin to blame for leading his son astray. At least Moe Kosawatsky, still in the USSR, was off the hook. Soon after this conversation, when Sarkin brought in an advertisement to The Eagle, Herschel shouted at him: “You have stolen my sons. I shall never forgive you.” Moishe was convinced he had to move. Besides, he knew he had to break things off with Ruth. Leaving town was the easiest way.
Charlie Sims And The WUL

In March he got a call from Fred Rose. The Workers' Unity League was holding its convention in Montréal. Could some delegates stay at his home? With Herschel and Sarah both away for the weekend, Moishe readily agreed. Five showed up at his door. Although they were only a few years older than himself, they were already veteran union organizers and party stalwarts. Among them was Joshua Gershman, organizer for the Industrial Union of Needle Trade Workers, Charlie Sims, chief organizer of the Workers' Unity League, and Izzy Minster of the Chesterfield and Furniture Workers.

Gershman was immediately suspicious. Was this not the son of Herschel Wolofsky, publisher of the Canadian Jewish Eagle, voice of the Liberals, friend of the Jewish garment manufacturers? Not for a few years would Gershman forgive Bill his father, but during that weekend he regaled the publisher's son and the others with stories about a strike he had led only a few months earlier at the Diana Dress Shop. "You see the strike was successful and the workers, most of them young women — we got them an increase of $3.50. What happens? Monday, a week after the strike is settled, a bunch of them together with the shop committee, bring back their $3.50. They say they were at church on Sunday and the priest told them that the money was obtained dishonestly. Did you ever hear of such a thing? They begged me to give it back to the boss. So what do I do? I go to their homes and tell their parents it is perfectly legal to join a union and that the money is theirs. They have earned it. I never heard from them about it again."

Izzy Minster had by now fully recovered from the seven week general strike at Stratford. Bill had heard about the strike. Who hadn't? But there stood the man who, along with young Fred Collins, actually led it. Barely five feet tall, Isadore Minster was slight, dark, and spoke with a heavy accent — hardly the prototype proletarian hero, Moishe thought to himself. But what courage and chutzpah going into that conservative Anglo-Saxon town and leading the furniture workers out on a general strike. The first one since Winnipeg 1919.

"You see, it was like this," Izzy began, "we just won a big victory in Toronto with eleven companies. We got wage increases, a 44-hour week and overtime pay after 48 hours, closed shops, even hiring through the union. Of course the Stratford workers were impressed. We said they could have the same if they stuck together."

"You should have heard what Fred Collins said at our first rally. 'A strike is war'," he said. "'In war you know what is done to a man who spies. A man who scabs on his fellow workers in a strike is a spy, a traitor to himself and his class. We have ways of dealing with scabs.' Fred got a rousing reception."
"We organized a parade in the town. Two thousand marched. All the other unions were there in full support. Even the local newspaper backed us at first. The companies offered us hardly a thing. Our people fought back the scabs. The companies brought them in trucks to ship out finished furniture. Then the Attorney General sent in the tanks. You must have heard about it. Four tanks down the main streets of the town and two companies of troops. Outrageous. And the townspeople said so. We held a protest meeting. Five thousand came. Imagine. In conservative Stratford. The strikers held firm. Such militancy! When the factories opened their doors not a single striker went in. Then we combined forces with the meat packers. They were on strike too. Almost the whole city was out."

"Soon the red baiting started. The same old thing. The WUL is the Canadian branch of the Red International. All they're interested in is fomenting revolution. They even got Tom Moore [president of the Trades and Labour Congress] to repudiate us and Mosher [president of the All Canadian Congress of Labour] put in his two cents worth too. Here, look what the RCMP said about me and Fred." Izzy pulled out a newspaper clipping: "COLLINS AND MINSTER ARE A MENACE TO THE SAFETY OF LIFE AND PROPERTY IN THE CITY."

"Did the red-baiting worry our strikers? Not a bit. They said they got no interest in our politics. They said they wanted a union, protection, and better working conditions, and that's what we were for too. We organized support all over the country. Even the CCFers and Mayor David Croll of Windsor went along. We had tag days. Our Toronto members gave five percent of their wages to a special fund. A thousand dollars a week we gave out for food, rent and things. But it was getting cold. Could we supply fuel too? We couldn't hold out much longer. The companies said they were shutting down and pulling out. So we settled. Sure we got some improvements, but no recognition for the union. Could we stay out forever? It was the best we could get. Anyway, we showed the workers and the capitalists too. We showed them a real class struggle union."

Bill was intrigued, fascinated, hungry for more. But it was neither Joshua Gershman nor Izzy Minster that impressed him the most that weekend. It was Charlie Sims, short, wiry, foul-mouthed, Charlie Sims, an English coal miner who had come from Liverpool. He told Bill his story.

Charlie had drifted into the Drumheller, Alberta region and taken up with the Industrial Workers of the World, the Wobblies. The Wobblies, he explained, opposed the conservative unionism of the American Federation of Labor. A wild bunch, they organized the miners and lumbermen from British Columbia to Alberta, not just the skilled craftsmen. Not by collective agreements did they force better wages and working conditions. In fact they signed no agreements, didn't believe in them. They downed their tools,
Charlie explained. Joe Hill was their poet laureate; Big Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn their leaders. But Charlie said that he finally grew weary of the anarchistic methods of the Wobblies and saw the need for a revolutionary party. Then he joined the Communists.

A seasoned veteran of the Party, Charlie had already landed in jail several times. He also spent two years in Moscow’s famed Lenin School. With his clear steel-blue eyes and his rambling speech, Sims had none of the sophisticated and intellectual airs of some of his comrades. Moishe took to him instantly and they talked excitedly into the early hours of the morning. “Charlie, I’ve got to get out of here,” Bill said at last. “I want to join the Party. I want to do some organizing.” Charlie agreed. “You’re right. This is not the life for you. First chance, you come to Toronto. I’ll take it up with our people.”

Notes

2. When the King government finally repealed Article 98 in 1937, Québec premier Maurice Duplessis passed an Act to Protect the Province against Communist Propaganda — the Padlock Law. It was the most notorious piece of legislation in Canadian history, giving Duplessis the power to padlock any house, office, building or school and to imprison whoever he charged with conducting Communist propaganda — nowhere defined in the Act. Under the Act, the police raided labour and left-wing groups, disrupted meetings of the CCF, seized anti-fascist literature, banned films, padlocked book stores and raided the homes of leading political activists.
3. Penner, Canadian Communism, 117.
5. Tim Buck, Thirty Years (Toronto 1952), 96.