STEVE NELSON, American Radical

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Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, Rob Ruck

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UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

Published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15260

Eurospan, London
Manufactured in the United States of America
Paperback reprint 1992

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Nelson, Steve, 1903–
Steve Nelson, American radical.

Includes bibliographical references and index
1. Nelson, Steve, 1903– 2. Communists—United States—
Biography. 3. Radicalism—United States—History—20th century. I. Barrett,
James R., 1950— joint author. II. Ruck, Rob, 1950– joint author. III. Title.
HX84.N44 335.43'T092'4 [B] 80-26528
ISBN 0-8229-3441-8.—ISBN 0-8229-5471-0 (pbk.)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Portions of chapters 3 and 7 are adapted from Steve Nelson, *The Volunteers* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1953)

Portions of chapters 10 and 11 are adapted from Steve Nelson, *The 13th Juror* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1955)

To Margaret, who shared many
of these experiences with me

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Introduction

To many, the idea of American communism seems a paradox. Conventional wisdom tells us that communism is something foreign; one cannot be a Communist and still be a good American. Yet somewhere between five hundred thousand and one million Americans have joined the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) since its formation in 1919, and many more have supported its policies and activities at one time or another. At the height of its influence in the mid-1940s, the CPUSA had a membership of nearly eighty thousand, and many of these people were acknowledged leaders in trade unions, fraternal groups, and political and community organizations. As a personal experience, then, American communism has touched the lives of thousands; as a political influence, it has affected the lives of millions.[1]

Many observers have likened the Party to a revolving door through which members passed quickly in and out. During the 1930s, for example, turnover ran over 50 percent of total membership.[2] Some, however, stayed on to become cadres, lifelong revolutionaries making extreme personal sacrifices to advance the goals of socialism. Steve Nelson was one of these.

Steve Nelson's life is virtually a chronicle of class conflict in the twentieth century. His story takes us from the hard-working farmers of a small Croatian village to the unemployed miners of eastern Pennsylvania's anthracite coalfields; from the battlegrounds of civil war Spain to the jails of cold war Pittsburgh; and from a tiny cell of Communist auto workers meeting in the back of a Detroit cooperative restaurant to the upper reaches of Party leadership in New York City.

It is the typicality of Nelson's experience, however, rather than its exceptional qualities, that makes it most significant. In many respects

his story is that of the Party's rank and file, and particularly of the immigrant workers who represented the majority of Party members throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.[3] For most of his life, Nelson remained a working-class organizer, reluctantly accepting leadership only after being convinced that the interests of the movement were at stake. When he went to work full-time for the Party in the early 1930s, it was as an organizer of the unemployed, facing the difficult task of converting theory and official policy into successful practice. He was in his element on the streets of Chicago and Detroit or in the anthracite mining towns, but decidedly not in the Party's Manhattan headquarters. Nelson came up from the ranks but remained close to them even as he led. His view of the Party is that of a foot soldier rather than that of a general in the revolutionary movement.

One way of understanding the broader context of Nelson's story is to consider simultaneously three parallel processes: Nelson's own development, that of radical immigrant workers as a group, and that of the Party. The dynamic relationship between individual, class, and Party can help clarify the experience of American communism.

Every immigrant, like Steve Nelson in 1920, faced a confusing array of new impressions and strange conditions. People who had lived in European industrial cities or worked in factories may have been less disoriented than those from farming villages, but all of them looked for ways in which to make sense of their new environment. Each immigrant had to undergo "Americanization," a period of adjustment to life in urban-industrial America. For some, revolutionary socialism offered both an explanation of how American society worked and an organizational structure that could help the newcomer in this difficult period of adjustment.

When Nelson struggled to understand his own experiences and what he saw around him—war, racism, poverty—working-class radicals provided him with answers. The world war, they said, had not been a crusade for democracy but a mindless slaughter of fellow workers in the interests of the rich. Racism was one more tool used by the boss to divide workers from one another. Poverty was not a natural condition but the result of the exploitation of one class at the hands of another, something to be abolished, not endured. Nelson's assimilation into American society came through the Communist Party, which during the 1920s and 1930s offered to thousands of immigrant workers its own version of Americanization.

There were also practical problems, such as the English language. Many immigrants enrolled in English and citizenship classes in public evening schools or at the YMCA. Others picked the language up infor-

mally on the job or in the neighborhood or never learned it at all. Still others learned to read and write as Nelson did, through the socialist movement. Their primers were the Marxist texts, Party propaganda, and radical literature handed around by their comrades. Their maiden speeches were delivered not in civics class but on soapboxes on street corners in the slums of America's industrial cities and towns. Their writing exercises were the leaflets and shop papers that they produced to win fellow workers to their views. For those who had never known the opportunity of an education, the Party provided study groups and workers' schools. It encouraged self-confidence, especially among those who, like Nelson, showed potential as working-class leaders. It opened up the world of learning at a time when few others seemed to care.

Nor did the Party ignore the needs of the heart. During the 1920s foreign-born Communists enjoyed a vigorous social life based on the cultures of the Party's foreign language federations. Croatian-American communism, for example, was not all study groups and picket lines; it was also picnics and dances, cruises and plays. While all these activities were infused with the message of class struggle, young immigrants found in them people with whom they had much in common besides politics.

But communism offered immigrant workers more than literacy, culture, comradeship, and the opportunity to develop as leaders, more even than a key to understanding their own situation. It offered them a way out, a solution to the problems they faced. The Party was one means of fighting back. In a world of chronic unemployment, low wages, dangerous work, and discrimination, the Communist Party provided the vision of a more just society and inspired the determination to make this vision a reality. This above all else is what won the loyalty of Steve Nelson and thousands of other immigrant workers and sustained them in the face of overwhelming odds.

The Communist Party moved through its own kind of Americanization, beginning in the late 1920s and reaching a high point in World War II. It evolved from a tiny underground sect, based almost exclusively on foreign-born revolutionaries, into a large, broad-based political movement that brought its members into the mainstream of American life. This evolution was partly the result of conscious policy decisions. In 1928 the foreign language federations were replaced by a structure based on neighborhood and workplace, and during the mid-1930s the popular front strategy freed Communists to work in mass organizations such as the CIO with activists representing a broad spectrum of political views. In the 1940s strong Party support for the American war effort helped it to overcome, at least temporar-

ily, its image as an alien political group. But the Americanization of the Communist Party was also the product of its own expansion and increasingly diverse membership and the interrelationship between this new membership and Communist theory and practice.

Even during the 1920s, Party membership was in itself a step away from the ethnic segregation of the immigrant ghetto. It was at Party gatherings that Nelson first got to know Italian, Jewish, and both black and white native-born workers. The Party's switch to industrial organizing in the late twenties accelerated the breakdown of ethnic barriers among its members and offered an opportunity to recruit more American-born workers.

The Comintern's so-called Third Period (1928–1935), prior to the adoption of a popular front strategy, is often remembered as the most sectarian stage in the CPUSA's history. The Communists attacked Socialists and other leftists as "social fascists," launched dual "revolutionary" unions to compete with those of the American Federation of Labor, and formulated the goal of an independent Negro state in the southern Black Belt. The disabilities that organizers faced in trying to apply such policies emerge in Nelson's description of the Communists' National Miners Union in the early 1930s. But his experiences also suggest that in this period the Party laid the basis for much of its success over the next fifteen years. Here are the roots of what Communists called "mass organizing" among industrial workers, the unemployed, and blacks in the Deep South. Field organizers stressed wages, welfare, and civil rights, not the establishment of a Soviet America. With the beginning of this mass work in the early thirties, particularly organizing of the unemployed, the Party expanded its membership to include many more blacks and second-generation ethnics. By 1936 the CPUSA had more than forty-five thousand members, and for the first time a majority were native-born.[4] The influx of these members, who focused far more on domestic social and economic grievances than on international and theoretical concerns, strengthened the Party's own shift away from the ethnic and political sectarianism of the twenties to a popular front approach.

During the 1930s this younger generation of Communists constituted much of the leadership for the mass organizations that provided popular pressure for New Deal welfare and labor reforms. After building a national network of unemployed councils based in city neighborhoods and industrial towns, Communists worked with Socialists and other radicals to establish in 1935 the Workers' Alliance, the largest organization of unemployed workers in the country. The Party also provided many of the CIO organizers who built industrial unions

in the steel, electrical, meat-packing, and other mass production industries by the Second World War. Using its connections in the black and immigrant communities, the Party mobilized fraternal groups that provided invaluable support for the CIO in its early years. In Minnesota, Wisconsin, and elsewhere, Communists worked with liberal Democrats to create progressive electoral coalitions.[5]

As a result of this mass work of the thirties, the Party achieved its largest membership in history by the middle of the Second World War. Its success also left the veterans of these movements committed to a broad-based and flexible organizing strategy. For Nelson, the crucial experiences were organizing the unemployed in Chicago and Pennsylvania and serving as a commissar with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War.

This change in direction was accentuated by the Party's policies and the experiences of individual Communists during the war. The alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States allowed Party members to temporarily bridge the seemingly insurmountable gap between being an American and being a Communist. Working through the CIO unions and such black and ethnic organizations as the National Negro Congress and the American Slav Congress, both of which they had helped to create, Party activists mobilized working-class community support for the war. They pushed for greater productivity in the shops, urging workers to forgo their right to strike, and many Party members entered the armed forces. As a result Communists gained important recognition for their efforts and cemented a left-liberal partnership that found its counterpart abroad in the projected postwar cooperation of the Allied powers. These experiences culminated in the liquidation of the CPUSA in May 1944 and its reorganization as the Communist Political Association (CPA), which was designed more as a political pressure group within the New Deal coalition than a revolutionary vanguard.

The disintegration of the Soviet-American alliance in the course of 1945, however, undercut the concept behind the CPA and precipitated a reassertion of Soviet influence over the policies of the American Party. The reemergence of a sectarian position in the CPUSA coincided with the cold war at home and abroad. Increasingly isolated from the mass movements in which they had thrived during the thirties and the war years, Communist activists were vulnerable to attack by the government and right-wing forces. By the mid-fifties government prosecution and cold war hysteria had rendered the American Communist Party impotent.[6]

The significance of the communist experience in the era of the

popular front lies both in the ability of the Party to recruit more successfully and in the political impact that the recruits had on the Party. Many who remained as cadres after the thirties led the fight to de-Stalinize the Party and reconstitute it on a more democratic basis following the international crisis of 1956. Khrushchev's disclosure of the Stalinist atrocities in the early part of that year, followed by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in the fall, rocked the international Communist movement. Long repressed doubts about the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Soviet purges of the thirties now burst to the surface. Calling for a break with the tradition of subservience to the Soviet Party and a fundamental reassessment of the concept of democratic centralism, these reformers sought a new road to socialism based on the cultural and political realities of postwar America.[7] Although their efforts failed, similar movements in Europe and elsewhere have produced more democratic and autonomous Communist parties. Many of the ideas now commonly associated with the term *Eurocommunism* appeared in the program supported by a majority of American Communists during the CPUSA's 1956–1957 crisis. The campaign to transform the Party originated in the isolation endured by this generation of mass leaders in the McCarthy era. This fact has never emerged more clearly than in Nelson's description of his own experiences when on trial and imprisoned for sedition in Pittsburgh.

Until recently, most historians of the CPUSA have conformed to either the "totalitarian" school of interpretation or the "pick-and-choose" school. Those adhering to the former, the prevailing view, have generally seen the Party as a Soviet puppet and its cadres as "malleable objects" of the Party leadership. Practitioners of the pick-and-choose approach, usually political radicals, have rifled through the Party's history looking for failures and successes that will support their own analyses.[8] Perhaps the greatest strength of Nelson's story is that it makes the successes and failures of the Party's history understandable as the product of human agency and individual initiative as well as external political factors. It forces the reader to discard simplification and accept the development of the Communist Party as a complex process. While Nelson substantiates the role of the Soviet Union in influencing the American Party, he offers a counterpoint—that much of the politics of the American Communist movement came not from Moscow but from its involvement in the social struggles of the times.

Work on this book began almost four years ago, but our relations with Steve Nelson go back a decade. In 1970, one of us, Rob Ruck,

was living in Pittsburgh awaiting trial on charges growing out of a courtroom melee with police following an antidraft rally. The media, in the convention of the times, had dubbed the defendants the Pittsburgh Five. A friend and fellow activist, Bob Nelson, introduced his father to the defendants as a member of the original Pittsburgh Five, who had been charged with conspiring to overthrow the government under the Smith Act some two decades earlier. The meeting opened a door to the recent past. In the following years, Ruck and Maggie Patterson visited Steve and Margaret Nelson at their home on Cape Cod and on several occasions recorded conversations with Nelson that were edited into radio documentaries.

In 1975 the two of us met while doing graduate work at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1977 Nelson returned to the city for a visit, and we were in the audience when he spoke to a group of graduate students in labor history. His willingness to rethink his own experiences convinced us that Nelson's stories should have a wider audience. We decided to approach him about working with him on his memoirs. Putting his story down on tape and in print was not a new idea to Nelson. Many people had urged him to do so for years, and he had already recorded a good deal about his experiences in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania during the Depression. He agreed to work with us.

That summer we spent a week with him, taping for six hours a day in a little work shed he had built in his backyard. After Jenni Barrett transcribed these sessions, we corresponded with Nelson and asked dozens of follow-up questions that he answered on tape or in letters. During the next year we met twice and continued the taping.

The following summer we wrote the first drafts of nine chapters. Nelson read and criticized these chapters, and at the end of the summer the three of us met to develop another draft. This process continued through three years and involved five drafts, several more sessions, and a great deal of correspondence with Nelson and outside readers.

More than one hundred hours of transcribed interviews along with Nelson's earlier writings and recordings about his experiences in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania, Spain, and Pittsburgh were the main sources used to write this book.[9] In many of our taping sessions, Nelson had given a great deal of thought to what he wanted to say, and we were able to sit and listen, asking an occasional question. Yet there were many times when our questions forced him to think about something or someone he had not considered in years. That is not an easy task, and we were constantly surprised at how well he was able

to dig deep and come up with answers to our questions. It is his remembering and rethinking that shape this book. The two of us simply helped put it down in words.

At times we questioned Nelson insistently, often posing alternative interpretations of events. He usually answered thoughtfully and plausibly. We did not always agree with him, and on certain issues we still do not. These divergent interpretations sometimes pertain to national policies, such as the Communists' strong support for the New Deal Democratic Party or their decision to liquidate Party caucuses and cease publication of shop papers during the early CIO era. We differed in our assessment of the potential that the labor party movement and an independent voice within the CIO might have offered American Communists. Two examples on the international scene are the development of Stalinism in the 1920s and the 1956 rebellion in Hungary and the subsequent invasion by the Soviet Union. In our view Nelson's understanding of the roots of Stalinism does not fully acknowledge the impact of seven years of war and revolution in which the Soviet proletariat was virtually destroyed, allowing the Party to substitute itself for the working class as the historic agent of social change. In this context, whoever led the Party led the revolution.[10] Nelson's description of the social basis of the Hungarian revolt also seems oversimplified. He describes it as overwhelmingly reactionary; we believe this underestimates the popular support for the uprising and leaves him with an equivocal position on the Soviet invasion. This contrasts sharply with his adamant opposition to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Some readers will want a fuller treatment of certain problems Nelson raises. Recruitment of blacks, for example, has been a top priority for the Party since the Depression, and in fact the proportion of blacks in the Party rose during the thirties. Nelson was always committed to racial unity, but his direct involvement in organizing blacks was limited, and a reader wishing to pursue the subject would best look elsewhere.[11] This also applies to the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the World War II no-strike pledge. While there was significant opposition to both, Nelson's view is mostly confined to his experiences in the Bay Area, and it may suggest more Party unity on these policies than actually existed.[12] Other issues have spawned even more bitter controversy. Some will question why it took American Communists like Nelson so long to come to grips with Stalinism. Others will examine his discussion of the Spanish Civil War for insights into divisions of the Left. Nelson addresses these questions, but his answers will not satisfy everyone.

A major strength of Nelson's viewpoint is that it reflects the experience of a rank and file organizer; his concern is with the practical problems of mobilizing people to fight around specific issues. But this is a shortcoming in analyzing some questions of national and international policy. Nelson's concern with international struggles, demonstrated most clearly in his discussions of the significance of the Spanish Civil War, is obvious, but his view of the movement itself is primarily one of the local Party in action on a daily basis.

It is possible, of course, that Nelson is correct about these matters. What complicates their discussion is that one can never be entirely objective about such questions. Nelson devoted more than three decades of his life to the Communist Party, and he has a natural tendency to justify the key decisions and actions of those years. His critical reappraisal of his life was a difficult and often painful task, but his basic objectivity is impressive.

For Nelson and many young immigrant workers like him, the Communist Party was the primary means by which they made sense of American society and its host of highly complex economic and political phenomena. It was the prism through which reality passed into ideology. With time, this way of perceiving the world can also act as blinders, hiding from sight things that do not square up with Party policy. We felt that this was more of a problem for Nelson with foreign events than with domestic issues. His judgment of the rise of Stalinism in the twenties, the purge trials of the thirties, and the Hungarian rebellion inevitably depends on outside sources of information.

Anyone using these memoirs as historical documentation should also consider that they were based primarily on oral history. No man's memory is infallible, especially when it covers some seven-odd decades. Wherever possible, we have checked and double-checked Nelson's recollections through follow-up interviews, research in newspapers, HUAC proceedings, court transcripts, Communist Party publications, and secondary literature, and in his voluminous files obtained somewhat grudgingly from the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act. (The FBI material, however, was largely worthless as it was composed of pages ravaged by excision.)[13] A number of people with extensive movement backgrounds, many of them mentioned in the manuscript, were asked to verify the accuracy of Nelson's memoirs. What follows is how one man recalled the history he experienced. For the reader uninitiated in the names and events of twentieth-century radicalism, there are brief explanatory notes located at the end of the book.

Many people helped us on this book. David Montgomery's initial encouragement was compounded by his usual careful reading and

penetrating questions of an earlier draft. His tenure at the University of Pittsburgh attracted a number of young labor and social historians who formed our reference group and created a particularly supportive and stimulating environment.

Financing this project has always been a problem: transcriptions of interviews alone ran into thousands of dollars. We were aided in the beginning by a small sum from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission when John Bodnar hired us to conduct several interviews with Nelson regarding immigration and the Party's activities in Pennsylvania. Robert Colodny, a constant source of intellectual sustenance, then procured a small grant for us from the Provost's Office of Research and Development at the University of Pittsburgh. Later we received a Youthgrant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that allowed us to spend an entire summer working on the book.

Max Gordon, Dorothy Healey, Peggy Renner, David Goldway, Nat Cohen, Stella Petrosky, Robert Colodny, Ben Dobbs, Josie Nelson, Milton Ost, Bob Nelson, Jeremy Brecher, Steve Sapolsky, Pete Rachleff, John McDermott, John Muldowney, Dave Smith, Bill Susman, Morry Calow, Tom Lloyd, and Charley Flato read all or parts of the book and offered their thoughts. Their contributions were innumerable and our thanks deep. Al Richmond was especially sensitive in his suggestions and editorial help. Al Amery, a veteran of the fight in Spain, helped us at a particularly difficult time and typed a large section of an earlier draft for us. Frank Zabrosky of Pitt's Archives of Industrial Society advised us on the NEH grant. Faye Schneider, Marge Yeager, Millie Baer, and Gerri Katz helped us subvert bureaucratic procedures and cut countless corners.

Jenni Barrett, whose historical expertise was particularly important to chapter 5, and Maggie Patterson, who co-produced the early radio documentaries on Nelson, were a part of the project from the beginning and have helped make the book more readable and interesting. Margaret Nelson, Steve Nelson's partner and comrade for over five decades, was the source of much material, and she helped us all maintain perspective and a sense of humor. Finally, Abby Levine, our editor at the University of Pittsburgh Press, found inconsistencies, ambiguities, and problems in the manuscript and then worked with us on clearing them up.

Steve Nelson retains a deep commitment to radicalism, and this is one of the strengths of his memoirs. But even those who disagree with him must consider the links his experiences illustrate between that radical activity and reforms that have changed the character of daily

life in this country. For those who share his vision of a changing society and will try to make their own way over some of the paths he has taken, we hope this book makes the going a bit easier.

James R. Barrett and Rob Ruck
December 1980
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

STEVE NELSON, AMERICAN RADICAL

ONE

From Subocka to Pittsburgh

Like millions who came before and after me, I brought more to America than my battered luggage. Life as I had known it up to that time revolved around Subocka, a village of fewer than one hundred families in a fertile farming region of Croatia, part of present-day Yugoslavia. It could hardly have contrasted more sharply with life in the industrial cities and mining towns that were to be home for most of my life. The distance between this tiny village in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Philadelphia or Pittsburgh must be measured in ideas and experiences as well as miles, but it is here that the story begins.

This village, where I was born Stjepan Mesaroš in 1903, nestled in a narrow valley, the hillsides covered with cornfields and the hilltops with forests. Small farmhouses were scattered through the valley, their red tile roofs contrasting with the whitewashed stucco walls. My family's home stood on the banks of the Subocka River.

My family were millers on both sides for generations, and our one stone mill was the focal point of the community. In addition to grinding wheat and corn, we also had a press for sunflower oil and pumpkinseed oil, which were in great demand during Lent. As people waited for their grain, they spoke of local news and what little they'd heard of the world beyond. Because it was one of the few buildings that burned its kerosene lamp late into the night, the mill attracted the local farmers who came to talk or to play cards.

Ours was one of the few stone houses in the town. It had walls of limestone and a red tile roof. Eight of us—my grandparents, parents, three sisters, and I—slept in two bedrooms that were heated by a single stove. The third room was a kitchen in which we cooked and ate. In the attic was a smoking room where meats were hung for curing; below was a brick storage cellar where we stored my grandfather's plum brandy and our winter supply of food. Attached to the

house and extending out over the river stood the mill with its huge stone and high-beamed ceiling.

The family was rather well off by Subocka standards. Like most of our neighbors, we raised our own vegetables and farm animals, and the income from the mill was supplemented by the sale of hogs that were fattened on ground corn. The forest had been protected for hundreds of years, and each family was entitled by common right to one tree each year. This provided us with most of the firewood we needed; the rest was gathered by the children from the floor of the woods. We bought our shoes, boots, and coats at the market, but my mother and grandmother made most of our clothing on an ancient sewing machine, one of the few in town.

In many ways it was still a harsh existence. There had originally been five sisters, but two died during a diphtheria epidemic that spared me. If the harvest was a bad one, we felt it along with everyone else in the village. And always there was a lot of hard work.

The mill provided a fairly steady income but demanded constant supervision and repair. Throughout each night a bell attached to a wheel summoned me every time one load of grain was milled and another had to be poured into the bin. The operation required the skills of a blacksmith, wheelwright, and general mechanic. My grandfather was a master of the craft and taught me how to make replacements for the mill's cogs and gears. These had to be very sturdy but also precisely spaced to within one thirty-second of an inch; an irregularly spaced cog would cause the whole building to shake. We had a gasoline motor to drive the mill when the water level was too low in the summer, but it was cheaper to rely on the river to turn the wheel. To ensure an adequate supply of water, the sluices, which regulated the flow, had to be adjusted day and night. Twice a week the stones themselves, which weighed nearly two tons, had to be taken off, turned upside down, and sharpened. They could be removed on a complicated system of rollers, but you had to know what you were doing. One slip meant that the stones would have to be reinstalled by hand, a big job for five or six men. It took a long time to become an expert miller, and for me the process began when I was eight years old.

Much of the work, as difficult as it seemed at the time, was very different from what I came to know in American factories. Even in the mill, work was always mixed with the conversation of the farmers. Often I worked outside in fulfillment of a sort of community ethic that certain kinds of work were to be done in common. In the late summer threshing became the main task, and no family could accomplish this alone. My family had a rather primitive threshing

machine, and I traveled with it, working with three or four households at a time until the job was done. Corn-husking was also done collectively. The family picked the corn and brought it into the house where the young people would get together and sit for hours, singing and telling stories while they worked. Money never changed hands. It was always an exchange of labor: you help me raise my barn, and I'll help you cut your hay.

My formal education consisted of five years in a one-room school with 130 other children at different grade levels and stages of development. Understandably, any learning that took place was almost accidental. In fact, it was the older children who did much of the teaching. One of my tasks in third grade was to drill the younger children on their multiplication tables, and in the process I learned them myself. I must have been out chopping wood for the school stove or teaching arithmetic when most of the reading was taught. By the time I left school, I was able to read only simple Bible stories illustrated with pictures of God (either an old man or a pyramid with an eye, I was never sure which) and the angels (fat little babies with wings). When I left the old country at the age of seventeen, I was barely able to read, and I could hardly write at all.

My only other educational experience was a brief course at a manual training school where I learned about weights and measures. There was some thought given to the idea of having me trained as a beekeeper. I'll never know how much I might have enjoyed this noble profession, for the war intervened to change this and many other aspects of my life.

But as every student knows, some of the best lessons are taught outside of the classroom. Aside from the ancient skills passed on to me from my grandfather, the atmosphere of the mill itself was educational. Here I spoke and listened to as many kinds of people as there existed in our village and occasionally to an outsider.

In spite of how backward life there was in many ways, Subocka was not a stagnant place. The early twentieth century was a period of rapid change, and some of these changes were felt in my region. In a neighboring town, for example, there was a large landowner who reminded one of a feudal baron. He had two or three thousand acres of choice land and dozens of families living on tiny plots in serflike status, but he operated the place on quite a modern basis. He had some of the most advanced farm machinery and was raising crops and breeding cattle for the export market. This kind of mixture of ancient and modern characterized the whole region, as I recall it. There were hundreds of little communities like ours where money was seldom if

ever used in the local economy, but there were also larger towns with machine shops, brickworks, and small factories. Our part of the forest was still protected under common right, but in other areas trees were being cut down, processed in large lumber mills, and shipped out for export. A railroad ran through several of the towns close to us, and this was already beginning to affect life and work in Subocka. The younger people especially would walk to the large towns to work in factories or to do the seasonal brickyard work. At the time it would have been difficult for me to visualize a city like Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, but even my little world was no longer the same, and I was aware of this.

Among all my impressions, that of the First World War looms largest, and it might even suggest the only link I can discover between life in Subocka and my later radicalism. I was twelve years old when the war broke out, shattering the daily routine of this little world and changing my own life in a number of ways. The whole experience had a shocking effect. It made me feel that something was wrong in the world, even if I couldn't put my finger on it.

I recall driving five or six neighbors and my father in our wagon to a mobilization center where I saw thousands of men gathered sullenly around tents and field kitchens. All the men seemed worried, not only about the prospect of dying in a war which none of them understood, but also because of the practical problems that arise when a farmer becomes a soldier. One had not finished ploughing; another had not laid in a sufficient supply of wood. Their families would be in rough shape for the winter, with responsibilities falling on the shoulders of wives and older children.

This was all very confusing for a twelve-year-old boy. The farmers used the Serbo-Croatian term *vatru* to describe their fate. I translated the term literally to mean "going into fire" and imagined my father and neighbors marching into a wall of flames. I already hated war without really understanding what it was.

War was like a plague that quickly disrupted our way of life. As the war dragged on, destitute widows and the wives of young soldiers drifted into town half-starving and were taken in by farm families. My cousin returned almost immediately, badly wounded through the stomach and hip. He recovered but limped for the rest of his life. One neighbor came back without a leg, and people wondered, what good will he be on a farm? I surveyed the misery from my vantage point at the center of the community.

The war also broke down some of the barriers between Subocka and the rest of the world. We became aware of death and starvation in

Bosnia, which was less than fifty kilometers away but had never attracted our attention. Russian and Italian prisoners of war arrived to work on some of the larger farms. This business of men from faraway lands with strange languages who left their families and ended up in our little town seemed fantastic.

It was as a result of the war that I first heard of the Russian Revolution, though at the time I couldn't understand what it was all about. One day my mother and I met a neighbor on the road leading into town. He had been a prisoner in Russia, and we were the first familiar faces he had seen. The man immediately asked us about his family. That night he came over to the mill and told us of very strange events that were occurring in Russia. It seemed that there had been something called a Bolshevik Revolution, but he could not explain exactly what this was. We only knew that the czar, a symbol of tremendous power for us, had been dethroned by the people, and this in itself was impressive.

The war also precipitated my disillusionment with the Church. Because I was the first child in the town that the priest had baptized, he maintained a sort of proprietary interest in my soul, though up to this point I too had been conscientious about achieving salvation. I had had some misgivings. At confession the priest was especially persistent on the question of sex, and I could not understand why he kept pressing me on this. Still, I attended confession regularly, and I served as an altar boy for several years. But the Church's attitude toward the war brought many of my doubts regarding religion to the surface.

One Sunday in late August 1914, the priest ascended the stairs leading to the pulpit and spoke down to his congregation about our moral duties with regard to the war. After giving a dramatic description of Franz Ferdinand's assassination by Serbian nationalists at Sarajevo, he exhorted us to rally to the support of the fatherland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[1] A few weeks later, when I drove our neighbors to the mobilization center, there he was again, spreading incense and sprinkling the soldiers' rifles with holy water. As I watched him pray that 'our' side would prove to be the better killers, I remembered the words of the Fifth Commandment. I didn't stop going to church completely, but my attitude toward the priest was never the same.

As it turned out, there wasn't much time for church. I had to assume the duties of a grown man at the age of twelve, and with my mother's guidance, I learned how to maintain the mill, keep it going day and night, and hold the family together. In addition to the

milling, I had to make parts for the mill and care for the family's small herd of hogs, two cows, and a team of horses.

It was in our little mill under the kerosene lamp that I first heard of life in America from those who had made the journey and returned. Because there were no official guidebooks or other descriptions, my image of America was shaped by these emigrants. One returning family left their seaman's trunk with us until they could relocate, and I was intrigued by what I found inside. Their alarm clock, for example, was a source of great fascination; why should it matter whether one woke up at 7:55 or 8:05? It seemed more natural to be awakened by the first rays of the sun. Most emigrants offered stories of difficult and dangerous work. A young fellow who had worked in a tannery contracted the worst case of arthritis I have ever seen. When he tried to work with a scythe, he looked like some kind of grotesque skeleton. A Serbian who had worked at Standard Plumbing Supply in Pittsburgh described how he had become consumptive from breathing fumes in his shop, while another fellow was called "Nine-fingered Man" because he had lost one finger in a Detroit auto plant. Nor would such dangerous work necessarily bring one a fortune in America. My father let one returned emigrant stay for the winter with us, and when it was discovered that he had stolen the family horse harness and disappeared, no one knew what to make of it. Crime was virtually unheard of in our village, and we concluded that the man had learned to "live by his wits" in the New World.

So when it was my turn to go, I was not expecting any streets of gold. But despite the tales of the returned emigrants, I still looked forward to the trip. It was an adventure that any seventeen-year-old boy would welcome, and even more, it was an escape from a deteriorating home life. His war experience had aggravated my father's drinking problems. He was getting more irresponsible and harder to live with.

Shortly after the war, my uncle came back on a visit from the United States, where he had been living for many years in Philadelphia. When he saw what my mother and the children had to endure, he offered to lend us the money for passage to the United States. My mother sat my sisters and me down and explained the situation, but the ultimate decision was hers. One of our major considerations was that I should avoid the draft. Everything happened so fast that I was stunned at first. There was not even time for me to say good-bye to my sweetheart; we left immediately. Soon, whatever sadness or fear I had was replaced by a sense of excitement as we started the long journey to America.

We made our way to Trieste, where the trip was delayed by a two week seamen's strike, the first strike I had ever seen. I spent the time exploring life in the largest city I'd ever visited. The red-light district depressed and even frightened me a little. I had gone several times to Brod, a fair-sized industrial town on the Sava River, to get gasoline for our motor. I had even seen Zagreb, but none of this prepared me for the size and color of a cosmopolitan port like Trieste. What I remember most is the beautiful crystal blue of the Adriatic Sea and the pungent smell of the waterfront.

The voyage itself was uneventful—boring, in fact. We spent twenty-two days in steerage on the *Argentina,* a rusty old Italian tub. Twenty-two days in the same room with one hundred other people, eating macaroni and dried fish morning and night, vomiting and losing weight. The only part of the voyage that I really enjoyed was the chance to talk with seasoned travelers who answered questions and offered advice. There were brief stops in Naples and Palermo to take on passengers and at Algiers to take on coal.

The *Argentina* arrived in New York Harbor on a steamy day in mid-July 1920. Because Ellis Island was closed for the weekend, we had to sit on board, thinking of what life would be like in this New World. I'd like to present a clear description of my immediate impressions, but I recall instead a series of images: the towering statue; the sky aglow with the lights of a city which had a population larger than that of my entire province; in the city, a maddening crush of horses, wagons, and people; the cavernous interior of the Pennsylvania Railroad Station, where I ate my first banana. What I felt most was a mixture of excitement and confusion. One of the most bewildering sights was what seemed like a wall of billboards stretching from New York City all the way to Philly. Camels, Coca Cola, Chesterfields. A fellow traveler read one that would come to have a special significance for me. It said, "Eat Berk's Frankfurters!"

My uncles, aunts, and cousins met us at the station in Philadelphia, and for the time being we moved in with them. News from home was exchanged for a welcome to the city, but conversation turned quickly to the search for work. My uncle looked me over and assured my mother that I would easily find a job. But there was some learning to be done in the process of job-hunting. At Ellis Island I was asked my trade and exclaimed proudly that I was a miller. And so on my second or third day in Philadelphia, I set out to find the city's flour mill. I would surprise my family and be back in my trade when I returned for dinner. Yes, my neighbors said, there was a flour mill within walking distance, but it might not be what I had in mind. Following

Steve Nelson shortly after arriving in Philadelphia, 1920.

their directions, I came to a building that was a city block long and several stories high. I heard a strange whirring sound coming from inside—electric motors. I looked around, but fortunately I couldn't think of enough English words to ask what seemed to me to be the obvious question: Where was the water? America, it seemed, was truly a different world. Shaken, I returned home and placed my fate in the hands of my uncle, who promised that he would find a good job for me. This was the first English word I and most other immigrants learned—"job."

My new home was an ethnically mixed working-class neighborhood on the North Side of Philadelphia. The immediate area was shared by Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Croatians, and Serbs. There was a Jewish community about two blocks away, and the blacks lived in the most depressed part of the neighborhood, separated from the whites by a railroad viaduct. Athough I soon learned the depth of racial antagonism in the city, there was little overt hostility in the community. It was more a question of two distinct cultures, two separate worlds.

A variety of industrial plants shared the narrow streets with the tiny three-story homes of the workers. Neighbors walked to their work in breweries, tanneries, a cigar factory, a slaughterhouse, or one of several small machine shops, or they took the streetcar to Baldwin Locomotive Works or Cramp's Shipyards. Most homes contained neither showers nor toilets, but there were privies in the courtyards, and the dirt and grease from a hard day's work could be washed away for a nickel in the public baths at the end of our street.

My first job was at Berk's slaughterhouse and packing plant, where my uncle knew a foreman. The place was small by Chicago standards, but then I had never seen Chicago, and it seemed huge to me. I worked with about three hundred others, mostly Hungarians, South Slavs, Poles, and Germans. I doubt if there were more than twenty-five or thirty American-born workers in the plant. The work paid twenty-eight cents an hour for five ten-hour days and eight hours on Saturday. My job was to pick hams and other meats out of the brine in the ice plant, cook them in large vats, load them onto a small truck, and push them into the smokehouse. Constant travel between the two extremes in temperature led inevitably to rheumatism and respiratory ailments, but the greatest hazard came in hanging the meats for smoking. The racks were several stories high and constructed from two-inch pipes that we had to climb in order to hang the meat over a smoldering smoke pit. The trouble was that the pipes collected the fat that dripped from the smoking meat, and they be-

came extremely slippery. The workers took turns climbing the racks, while those below handed the meat up to the climbers. After hanging a few hams you couldn't stand the heat and smoke anymore and had to get down.

After working for a few months, I concluded that I couldn't stay much longer without completely destroying my health. What finally convinced me was the experience of a Croatian immigrant, still in his thirties, who was so crippled with arthritis that it was impossible for him to keep up with the climbing. He was frightened to death, and one day he fell. We made a weekly collection for his family to which all of his workmates contributed. I visited him for weeks in the hospital until I could no longer stand the sight of his wife and kids crying. "Damn it," I vowed, "I'm not going back into that place another day."

I turned once again to my uncle, who talked to his foreman at Baldwin Locomotive Works and got me on the evening shift as his "bucker-up." This was the fellow inside the firebox of the locomotive holding a thirty-pound iron bar up against the rivet. The riveter, in this case my uncle, was on the outside of the firebox with a pneumatic hammer. The job had two major drawbacks. One was the deafening noise caused by dozens of air hammers banging up against rivets. In addition, the hammers spit a constant spray of oil, and there was practically no circulation. By the end of the shift I was covered with oil, and my head was throbbing with the sound of the hammers. I solved part of the problem by installing a sheet-metal tub in my room with a gas burner to heat the water. But the prospect of six days a week, nine and one-half hours a day, at thirty cents an hour really got to me. It looked terrible, and I didn't think I could last. For the first time I asked myself if it was really worth it. "Hell, if this is the only kind of work that I'm going to do, I'm going back. I was better off over there." I lasted about three months at Baldwin.

Next I got a job in a machine shop that had a large forge. During the war the place had been producing artillery and ammunition, but now it was reconverted to machine-building. I was in a work group of ten or twelve men: Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and one old Irishman. I operated one of three big 350-pound steam hammers. The left hand controlled the steam while the right set the timing. The hot iron hung from an overhead crane, and the men turned it with huge tongs while it was shaped by the hammer blows. Three or four giant men stood about the anvil. One had pockmarks like the face of the moon, and sweat would drip from one pock hole on his face to another and then fall off. We smelled like hell. Every time the hammer hit, steam and sparks spit from the hot metal, splashing all around and looking a

little like lightning. The men grimaced. It went on and on. Finally the metal got cold and had to be reheated. This gave everyone a break. They stuck the giant tongs into a barrel of cold water, then took off their goggles and washed their faces in the same water. In spite of the heat and the noise, this was the best job I'd had—thirty-six cents an hour. I also liked operating that big steam hammer. But the business had been falling off since shortly after the war, and the place shut down after I'd been there only a few months.

Around the time I was laid off, I saw an ad in the newspaper: "Carpenters Wanted." I wondered how to get the job, and somebody said, "You have to join the union." I found there were dues and an initiation fee of $50, more than two-weeks' wages on the forge job. But the pay was $1.12 per hour for an eight-hour day and a five and one-half day week. The shorter hours really appealed to me, but it was also a chance to be outside and to be doing work that was really creative, at least compared to hanging hams and bucking up rivets. I borrowed from friends and relatives, paid the initiation fee and dues, and joined the carpenters' union.

I didn't have a toolbox. I bought a hammer and a saw, a ruler and a square, stuck them in a gunnysack, and went to the place where a man was supposed to be hiring carpenters. I had never worked on a construction job and didn't even know the names of the materials and tools. But I got on a job, and the first morning the foreman said, "Steve, jump down into that hole (the foundation) and make a couple of stakes." Steaks? I thought it was a joke, but I took my tools down into the foundation and asked another fellow what he was doing. "I'm making stakes," he replied. I said, "Oh, I see." I just watched him and did whatever he was doing. I had many of the necessary woodworking skills from my milling experience, and I picked up the terminology as I went along. When I heard someone mention a joist or rafter or stud, I went home that evening and looked the term up in a dictionary or carpentry manual.

By the twenties carpentry was so specialized that there were actually skill levels within the trade. I started out as a floor layer. It was said that for this job one needed a strong back and a weak mind. From this level I progressed to shingling and then went on to finishing work of various sorts, door-hanging, and other jobs requiring a little more skill.

For the rest of my time in Philadelphia, from 1921 until late 1923, I worked at carpentry in the good weather and took whatever work I could find during the winter. At one time when my cousin and I were both out of work, we nearly got involved in strikebreaking. An

ad in the paper said that men were needed for gang work on the railroad, but when we arrived at an employment agency near Penn Station, workers were distributing leaflets. A man tried to explain the issues. I couldn't understand everything he was saying, but when my cousin wavered, the guy implied that it would be unhealthy to take the job. This I understood; we handed the leaflet back to him and continued our search for work. Rounding a corner, we saw some armed services recruiting stations. My cousin was very interested, and both of us needed work badly. We settled on the Marines, I think, because they had a flashy uniform. My aunt and uncle saved us. My cousin was under age and needed their written approval; fortunately, they refused.

Eventually I was hired at the Bud Wheel auto factory as a hammerman. In those days steel presses were so crude that lumps remained in the metal. I went along the sheet metal with an electric hammer, pounding out the lumps. The blood in your hands stopped circulating because of the rapid shaking, and the edges of the metal were sharp, so you ended up with a lot of little cuts. I also did sheet-metal work at a place called Hale and Kilburn, which made custom auto bodies. For a little while my mother and I worked in the same factory making chairs, and at another time I repaired and replated old milk cans.

But my life wasn't completely consumed by work or the search for it. Through my cousin and a number of other neighborhood contacts, I became part of an informal social club composed of several American-born fellows from different ethnic backgrounds. The experience was important because it improved my English and taught me more about life and customs in the United States and because it made me feel more at ease and provided some relief from the dismal prospect of unending hard work.

We paid dues of 50 cents a week and bought an old sunken boat, sight unseen, for $15. We raised it from the Delaware River, cleaned it off, and named it *Dixie*. I have no idea where we got the name. We went to work, pooling our skills. It took almost a year to get it back in shape. The mechanics picked up an old Packard truck motor in a junkyard, overhauled it, and put it into the boat. Another carpenter and I built the cabin, and from a carpenter's viewpoint it was perfect; from a sailor's it was not. We had no conception of what the winds would be like on the river, so we made it as comfortable as possible. The ceiling was high enough for us to stand up, and the floor was wide enough for dancing. When we took *Dixie* out for our first trip down the Delaware River, we almost capsized. The boat was loaded with people and soda pop, and we had to spend all our time shifting

back and forth to save ourselves. Some alterations were made, and *Dixie* remained afloat.

I also tried to get interested in sports, my cousin's main preoccupation. We went to the Bijou Theater where the local kids boxed on Friday nights, but I never really enjoyed it. He seemed satisfied to live his life through sports, but I was restless. I was always searching for ways to understand my own experiences, and this was leading me away from my cousin and the *Dixie* group. The search started one afternoon on a curb out in front of Berk's slaughterhouse.

During my first few weeks at Berk's, part of my mornings were spent driving livestock with a young black laborer who was friendly and helped me out in a number of ways. For the first couple of days, I had to shout at the cattle in Serbo-Croatian until he taught me how to cuss in English. I doubt if the beasts cared what language we shouted, but these were some of the first English words I learned, and I appreciated his efforts, Later in the day, when I joined my gang in the smokehouse, I noticed that he remained in the yards, shoveling manure from the pens and cattle cars. I wondered why he always seemed to get the dirtiest work, but I was a little afraid to ask. One day while we were eating our lunch, this black fellow was playing catch with one of the neighborhood kids. The ball went over his head and landed in a nearby gutter, so I picked it up and threw it back. But one of the white workers snarled, "Let the nigger pick it up himself!" I couldn't understand all the words, but I recognized the hatred in his voice.

The incident made me think about the problem of prejudice, which had been bothering me for some time. In Subocka there had been a certain hostility toward the Turks. I did not understand that it was primarily because of Turkish domination of the area generations earlier; I thought it was because they dressed differently. They were horse traders. On market day they rode through town in a group on horseback, as many as fifteen or twenty men. They were like a little army coming through, dressed in their wide breeches and turbans. The children feared them, and the adults clearly disliked them, though I never did understand why.

Not long after I arrived in Philadelphia, I was walking through the Jewish district with my cousin when he suddenly reached out and pulled an old man's beard. The man must have been over eighty years old, defenseless, and the act revolted me. But when I asked my cousin why he would do such a thing, he simply said, "He's a Jew!" I came home and told my uncle of the incident, but to my amazement he just laughed it off.

This time I was determined to find out what caused this sort of thing. There was a Serbian worker about ten years older than I who seemed to be different from the rest. Any time there was a break in the work, he would be reading a newspaper or pamphlet. I decided to take the chance; he seemed intelligent and might be able to help.

The Serb sat down next to me and explained that both bosses and workers were prejudiced against black people. "You'll soon learn something about this country." he said. "Negroes never get a fair chance." It seemed that once, not that long ago, they had been held in slavery, and now they were looked down upon for this and because of their skin color. This was why the black laborer got the worst jobs even though he'd been there much longer than some of the whites.

The next day the Serb brought a newspaper clipping to lunch that showed the Berk family on its way to vacation in Florida for the winter. The picture showed the young men in white pants and shoes and the young ladies in white summer dresses. The whole family was boarding a Pullman parlor car. The explanation proceeded in Serbo-Croatian.

"What's Florida?" I asked.

"That's a place that's warm in the winter."

"It's that far?"

"A two-day trip by train."

"Who goes there?"

"You can see who goes, only bosses."

"But the boss [the foreman, as I understood the setup] is still here."

"The Berks just hire him to run the factory. They get all the money."

He described the inside of a Pullman parlor car and told me how much some of the biggest industrialists earned and what this kind of money could buy. It was simply fantastic. He asked if I would like to read some things that explained how all this was possible. It turned out that he was a member of the Socialist Labor Party[2] and was interested not only in socialist ideas but also in popular science, temperance, organic foods, and atheism. It was in this way that my discovery of socialism as a way of understanding my own experience became interwoven with a more general thirst for knowledge. He introduced me to *The History of the Proletarian Family,* a series of works by Eugène Sue, the French utopian socialist. For the first time in my life I began to read novels, and these were books where workers were the heroes. He also gave me books on popular astronomy and geography. For a time I read anything I could find on the American

Indians and Eskimos. I still could not read in English, so there was a constant search for books and papers in Serbo-Croatian.

Soon I subscribed to *Radnička borba* (Workers' Struggle), a weekly newspaper put out in Chicago by the South Slavic section of the SLP. Most of the paper was filled with the speeches and articles of Daniel DeLeon, the chief theoretician of the party. Often I couldn't understand these writings, but I did like the reports from "worker correspondents" about labor and the socialist news from around the country. Whatever I had trouble with was more or less explained during lunch breaks or on evening visits to the Serb's rooming house.

He had a single room and a little kitchenette with a two-burner stove where he cooked his organic food. I still remember a picture on the wall. It was a woman standing almost naked with her arms raised. I couldn't understand why that naked woman was there; she didn't seem to fit in with the rest of his personality. He explained that she symbolized Liberty. The place was always jammed with pamphlets. Some inveighed against the evils of smoking, and others were written by Vaso Pelagich, a healer whose name was a household word among Croatian and Serbian nonconformists. Everything could be cured by one herb or another, and going to the doctor was a waste of time and money. My friend would start with this sort of thing and then switch off to explain more about how the capitalists exploited the workers. To him it was all part of the same story. We sat for hours over cups of tea, and I thought he was brilliant.

Eventually I joined the South Slavic branch of the SLP. It was a group of about fifteen workers, mostly articulate Serbians who were much older than I. The group's activities revolved around fund-raising events for the newspaper and an endless round of the dullest debates I've ever heard. We also sponsored a number of plays in Serbo-Croatian. These were crude efforts, but the audiences took them in stride. Because I and most of the other actors worked nine or ten hours a day, there wasn't always time to rehearse properly, and the prompter's whisper could often be heard halfway back into the audience. In retrospect the SLP seems extremely dogmatic and sectarian, but at the time it was my only connection with a vision to which I was becoming increasingly committed.

I listened to my Serbian friend's arguments and joined the movement for a very simple reason: it seemed like a rational response to the situation I faced. What he said explained why I worked so hard while the boss did not and also answered questions that had troubled me for years. In the old country, for example, I had been struck by

how pointless the war seemed. It brought only death and destruction, and people did not seem to understand why they were killing one another. And yet it all went on with the support of millions of good people. Surely I must be wrong; there must be some logic to it. The Serb explained that I had been right after all, that poor people did not really have anything at stake in war. But he was also able to show that some people did profit by it, and so it became clearer just how this war had come about. On the question of class, it was not hard for me to understand that I was one of a class of people who must sell their labor in order to live. Everyone I knew—my neighbors, family, and friends—shared the same predicament. That there were others who did not have to work but who lived off the workers—this too became clearer as I looked about me. Socialism offered an explanation of the problems that I and others faced, but it offered more than this. It opened up an alternative to the way that we were living. It showed that we could achieve a decent standard of living for all, that people could live together in peace.

Not long after joining the SLP, I was able to recruit several young Croatian waterfront workers, dredgers and longshoremen who had done similar work on the Dalmatian Coast. Almost immediately we became embroiled in a debate with the rest of the membership on an issue that was dividing the entire Left: the Russian Revolution. The official SLP line damned the Revolution with faint praise; only De-Leon had the answer for everything. At some time during 1922 our branch was invited to attend a benefit concert sponsored by the Russian Famine Relief Committee. Probably because of the Communist Party's involvement in the affair, the older members balked at the idea, while the younger ones insisted that we respond. We argued, "You say that you are for the Revolution, that the workers took over there and the bosses were dispossessed. So how come you don't want to support them now that they're in need?" Even though we didn't fully comprehend its significance, we were ardent supporters of the Revolution, and we continued to insist. Finally they elected me and another young fellow to attend the Relief Committee's conference as delegates. It was at this point that I came into contact with Communists for the first time.[3]

It is not complex theories that attract a young worker to a political movement but rather first impressions of those involved, of their sense of commitment, of the sorts of activities they support. It may have been the stagnancy of the SLP that made the CP seem more dynamic, but I was impressed. Most of the Communists I met were not much older than I, and for the first time I met women activists. In

the youth group, there was an even representation of the sexes. There were also ethnic differences between the two parties. The SLPers I knew were nearly all Serbian, while all of the Croatian radicals seemed to have gone with the Communists. Although the Party was an underground group in the early twenties, most CP members were active in trade unions, fraternal lodges, or neighborhood clubs, while SLP members remained isolated. They accused the Communists of being "pork-chop revolutionaries," concerned more with piecemeal reform than with revolution. But it was the CP that was striking roots among immigrant workers. Whereas the SLP spent all of its time *talking* about socialism, the CP seemed to be actively pursuing it. In spite of the strong Eastern European influence in the Party, its members also seemed to be more immersed in American life.

It was probably the CP's emphasis on work within the trade unions that attracted me most. I had become active in the carpenters' union almost as soon as I started work, and I always attended the meetings of my local. One of the first questions I remember raising was why the union couldn't push for an abolition of Saturday work. Most of the younger carpenters supported the idea. I did much of my work in Willow Grove, an hour's ride from home on the streetcar. I used to sit on the streetcar and read *The ABC of Communism* by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky in Serbo-Croatian. It seemed ridiculous to spend all that time taveling for four hours' work. A few supported the idea, but the business agent argued that when you found work, you couldn't be choosy.

I was especially impressed by a Croatian carpenter who was somewhat older than the other CP members, perhaps in his late thirties. He took me under his wing, and we talked about carpentry and union issues. The SLPers had always ridiculed my involvement in the "sellout" carpenters' union, but this Croatian took the matter seriously and told me how he worked in his local. "Why let the reactionaries continue to dominate the ideas?" he said. "Why not go into these conservative unions and sell them your ideas?" I had seen other Communists work on the same principle in my lodge of the Croatian Fraternal Union, and I was struck by their determination.[4]

The situation in the SLP was deteriorating at the same time that I was drawn by what I saw in the CP. With the four other young Croatians I broke away, and during 1923 we started attending a political education class sponsored by the Serbo-Croatian language federation of the Communist Party. This was a fairly large group of about twenty workers, each taking his or her turn in making a presentation. Some of this, of course, was a little too ambitious. When

you read Marx's economic formulas to a fellow who is just learning how to read, you're not going to get much of a reaction. But the basic message got through: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."

I joined the Young Workers League, the Party's youth group, which around 1930 became known as the Young Communist League (YCL). The Party was then divided into a number of language federations, and the league had three branches, one Italian, one Yiddish, and one English-speaking. I joined the English-speaking group, which was composed largely of American-born young people from Eastern European backgrounds.

Although I was not very conscious of this at the time, it now seems that at least part of the YWL's attraction was the opportunity it offered for socializing with people my own age with whom I had something in common. We had all sorts of socials to raise money for the league's paper, the *Young Worker:* dances, picnics, and outings. I met young people from the Italian and Yiddish groups on moonlight cruises on the Delaware River.

At this time the Party in Philadelphia probably had three hundred members, including a large group of recently arrived Jews from Russia who added a real Bolshevik flavor. The various language branches acted as propaganda groups within their respective nationalities, and this limited their influence in broader movements to some extent. But there was also a good deal of industrial organizing going on, especially among the younger comrades. There were YWL branches in the Nabisco cracker factory and another large bakery, and there was also an attempt to organize restaurant and cafeteria workers. During a lockout at Cramp's Shipyard, the Party helped to raise money and publicize the issues by staging parades through my neighborhood, complete with a little band and an American flag. Some of the most important work was going on among the city's hosiery workers, who emerged with a strong Left-led union by the late twenties. The largest occupational groups in the Party were probably the clothing and knit-goods workers and the building trades, where the Communists were quite influential within the carpenters' locals and among painters and bricklayers.

In spite of all the help it had provided me in adjusting to my new life, my political involvement was gradually driving a wedge between me and my family. My uncle, who was a small-time Republican ward heeler, had learned through one of his acquaintances that I subscribed to socialist papers. Because he had helped us to come into the country illegally, he feared that my activities would get him into

trouble. At one point he himself reported us to the authorities, but we were given an opportunity to become naturalized in spite of the violation. Life became a continual argument about the government, the economy, the race issue. Sometimes my mother would take his side. Though not nearly as antagonistic as he, she could not understand what she called "your socialism" and thought that I was wasting my time.

Just when I was thinking about leaving home, carpentry was becoming slack in Philly. A Slovenian carpenter friend said he knew of work in Pittsburgh, where he had friends. Pittsburgh was a good labor town, he assured me; we would find a strong union and plenty of work. Rather than face the problem with my family, I chose the easier option of leaving Philly in the fall of 1923. I took transfers from the YWL and my local union and headed for Pittsburgh.

I moved into the East Ohio Street neighborhood near the Party and YWL headquarters on Pittsburgh's North Side. It was the sort of neighborhood that was shaped by the needs of the single immigrant men who made up the bulk of its inhabitants: there were rooming houses, taverns and cheap cafes, stores selling work clothes, and newsstands stacked with the various foreign language papers. There was also a large park where the Party and the radical groups held open air meetings. My carpenter friend and I had a "baching" arrangement, which meant that we shared a couple of rooms and any cooking we might do on our little hot plate. Unfortunately, my friend had a drinking problem, and we soon parted ways. I took a room of my own and was able to pick up some carpentry work on new suburban homes.

It was reasonable to expect Pittsburgh to be a strong labor town, but this was not the case. The steel industry was strictly open shop; any union men were fired and blacklisted, and most other employers followed the example. Workers in the hotel and restaurant and building trades were organized but weak, and the Left was largely ineffectual within the city itself. The Pittsburgh branches of the Party and the YWL had a total of about two hundred members, mostly foreign-born industrial workers. Much of the Party's daily activity involved the ethnic and fraternal organizations, and within these circles the Communists were generally accepted and respected for their work.

The CP's real strength within the region was in the soft-coal towns surrounding the city and among the electrical workers of the East Pittsburgh, Turtle Creek, and Swissvale Westinghouse plants in the Monongahela Valley. In both industries rank and file Communists worked for years to develop a base for progressive industrial unions,

and the labor history of the region demonstrates how important this work was for the development of a strong labor movement there.

I joined the YWL branch on the North Side. It was composed largely of recent immigrants, many of whom had arrived since the war. During the week I worked at various carpentry jobs and attended meetings, but the weekend usually brought me to the coalfields. Because I often had to travel to building sites, I bought an old car, and this was requisitioned for the transportation of speakers and literature to the little mining towns along the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers. I listened to the speakers and talked with the miners, many of whom were Croatian immigrants, and what I saw and heard made a deep impression. In the old country families usually sent the biggest son to labor in the Pennsylvania mines, having heard how difficult and dangerous the work was. It was among these single immigrant miners that the Party found its strongest adherents in places like Canonsburg and Uniontown and throughout Washington and Westmoreland counties. Stool pigeons were planted among them, and some men were victimized repeatedly, but it didn't seem to slow them down. The young foreign-born miner didn't own a thing. He put some clothes in a suitcase, stuck the *Manifesto* in his pocket, changed his name, and moved on to another mining town.

The United Mine Workers (UMWA) and especially the leadership of District 5 under Pat Fagan seemed content to trade away everything for the security offered them by the dues check-off system.[5] The Communist miners' slogans were "Clean the union of bureaucracy" and "Fight to enforce the contract." In addition to opposing the Fagan machine and agitating against sellout agreements, our miners worked through the Croatian Fraternal Union, the Slovenian National Benefit Society, and other fraternal lodges and distributed literature about current political issues and the Soviet Union.[6] The Party assumed an important leadership role in the rank and file revolt produced by the union's rapid degeneration.

Some of my mornings and afternoons were spent standing at the entrance of the East Pittsburgh Westinghouse plant distributing shop papers. While the miners fought for control of their union, the electrical workers struggled to build one of their own. The first attempt to organize Westinghouse was launched by a group of Socialists and Wobblies[7] back in 1914 and was led by Fred Merrick, a Socialist who became the Communist Party's district chairman in western Pennsylvania after the war. In 1916 the radicals played an important role in a strike at the East Pittsburgh Westinghouse plant that quickly broadened into a movement embracing unskilled workers from many

industries in the area. The radicals led a giant strike parade down the valley from East Pittsburgh, shutting factories as they went, but the march was stopped by force at U.S. Steel's Edgar Thompson Works in Braddock. The strike was eventually broken and the leadership jailed, but many of the activists joined the Party and continued working in the electrical industry. From the early twenties through the 1930s, rank and file Party members and sympathizers carried on agitation for a union, and their efforts laid the foundation for the United Electrical Workers (UE), one of the largest and most dynamic of the CIO unions.[8]

Westinghouse embodied all the characteristics of "progressive" big business in the twenties: the latest in scientific management and piece-rate systems, a pension plan, and, of course, a company union.[9] It was into this atmosphere that the *Westinghouse Worker,* one of the best of the Party's early shop papers, was born.

When I arrived the paper was already in operation. At this point the Party and the YWL had about twenty members in the East Pittsburgh plants and a few more at the plants in Turtle Creek and Swissvale. The groups met at various homes to plan policies to counter those of the employers. One of their accomplishments was dissemination of information on what was happening in various shops. Payment systems were based on individual departments, and this tended to split the workers up. The *Westinghouse Worker* publicized and urged resistance to rate cuts and speedups and attacked various other conditions. There would be articles written by workers in the different departments about what was going on, how rates were being set. On the same page with these shop issues was agitation for socialism. But the trouble was that the agitation took the form of extolling the virtues of the Soviet Union. It was certainly understandable that American Communists would interest themselves in the world's first socialist society, but sometimes news about the Soviet Union was stressed to the detriment of important American developments. We said a lot about the growth of socialism in the USSR but little about what it would look like in the United States.

The Communists were the only ones doing this kind of work, and people responded with considerable support for the *Westinghouse Worker.* Some fraternal organizations permitted collections or lent their halls to raise money needed to keep the paper going. It was judged a great success, not only because it sometimes forced concessions simply by publicizing conditions, but also because it stimulated discussion in the shops and the community around a broad range of issues facing the workers. The paper raised the issues of women's

rights and what we now call male chauvinism, for example, when the labor movement and even many radicals ignored the problem. Westinghouse employed a good number of women, and there was constant agitation to upgrade their conditions.

Although production workers provided most of the paper's copy, the *Westinghouse Worker* had to be distributed by people from outside the plant in order to avoid victimization and blacklisting. The company owned the street in front of the plant and would arrest anyone handing out what they deemed to be "subversive" literature. The YWL members got around this problem by boarding streetcars and distributing the paper to men and women on their way to work. Occasionally one of the machinists would actually sneak a stack inside and push the papers off a balcony over the shop floor, scattering hundreds of sheets among the machines below. As supervisors scurried around trying to collect them, some workers were able to shove a copy of the paper into their overalls to be read later.

Another one of our concentrations was at the Heinz plant on the North Side of the city. At Heinz we had several people who had worked there for some time before becoming Party members or contacts. The Party constantly attempted to develop such contacts inside the factories and shops, and here the foreign language publications were important links. Because of the repression at the time, we were extremely careful about getting someone into trouble at work. This often meant that you had to go to the worker's home to discuss union organization or whatever else the issue might be. We would make assignments: "Who knows him? You know him through your lodge, so you might be the best one to talk to him." Then there would be a discussion about how we should approach this person. "You have to watch your step because his wife is a tough one, a strong churchgoer, and the priest is against us." Finally we began to put out leaflets containing information coming from our network of contacts inside the plant, but the production and distribution work was always carried on by outsiders. During the twenties and early thirties, these leaflets, or shop bulletins as they were called, were put out in the name of the Party, but eventually we decided this approach mixed up ultimate aims and immediate issues. In the era of the CIO such bulletins were discontinued or at least not distributed under the Party banner.

The basic labor policy was worked out by the district Trade Union Committee, a group of about eight that met once a month. In Pittsburgh it was led by John Otis, a machinist and a good, practical trade unionist. The committee would call in specific groups from Westing-

house or other plants when it was discussing their problems. It would also represent the district at national trade union conferences. At this time the Party was sending labor delegations to the Soviet Union, and a number of Pittsburgh trade unionists served on these.

One of the things about the Pittsburgh Party that impressed me most was the small group of black Communists there. The most popular figure was William Scarville, a well-known activist in the Pullman Porters Union and a veteran Socialist and IWW organizer.[10] His friend and constant companion was a white worker by the name of Smith, another former Socialist, with whom he shared an apartment. It was the first time I had seen comradeship across racial lines.

Scarville was a striking figure—he was over six feet tall, had shining gray hair, and always wore an immaculate suit, white shirt, tie, and polished shoes. He had a quiet sort of dignity that inspired admiration in you the first time you met him. He was a favorite at Party and YWL educationals not only because he knew how to pepper his presentations with anecdotes about what went on during the night on the train but also because of his remarkable facility for demonstrating complicated concepts with living examples. I still remember his lecture on the social relationship of workers engaged in a production process.

"You take the guys who are working in the mines along the Monongahela River and those barges that bring the coal. You don't know who dug the coal or who transported it or who unloaded it at the Jones and Laughlin mill [turning to a steelworker], but you work at that mill. You are working in the same production process, sometimes even for the same capitalist. So you have a social relationship with those other workers even if you never see them."

It was out of respect for workers like Scarville that young Communists in Pittsburgh developed a fuller understanding of racism.

My role in the YWL work was pretty minor. Mostly I observed, listened, and did as much of the "Jimmy Higgens" sort of work as I could organize around my carpentry jobs.[11] My problem was partly a lack of self-confidence—I felt the reticence that any worker feels in getting up to speak before a crowd. But I also had the special handicap of a recent immigrant worker trying to play some sort of role in the struggle with a five-hundred-word vocabulary. At one point, soon after I arrived, I was asked to deliver a May Day speech for a YWL branch, and I remember my anxiety. The meeting was in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, and the group was quite sophisticated by my standards, consisting of veterans of the YCL in the Soviet Union and American high school graduates. It seemed to me that I just didn't