

U. S. Commie Leader Lives In FBI Shadow

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NEW YORK (AP) — "The FBI," said the square-faced man behind the desk, "probably knows you're here, since you phoned me. It is also likely that this room is bugged and they'll have a record of our conversation."

This was said matter of factly, as though phone-tapping and room-bugging were routine facts of his life.

The man behind the desk was Herbert Aptheker, a leader of the American Communist party, and the subject of the interview was the question of how known Communists are treated in the United States in this second decade of the cold war.

Aptheker is regarded as among the party's leading theoreticians and was a member of its national committee until, he says, it was dissolved several years ago because of "legal complications."

He has been an active member of the party 26 years. His profession is that of social historian and lecturer. He is a man of 50, with gray, crew-cut hair, heavy-rimmed glasses, a friendly, slightly professorial manner and the slow, deliberate diction of someone who has fought a New York accent.

Although he spoke of "official harassment" and "hate mail" and threats on his life from unknown strangers, Aptheker did not wear the air of a martyr. Generally, he said, he has been well treated by his countrymen. "Americans," he said, "have a great tolerance for the neighborhood radical."

But there have been assorted difficulties, depending on the temper of the moment.

"I have, on occasion, lost some friends," he said. "There have been people who turned cool and avoided me when they learned I was a Communist, which was never a secret. People will, now and then, cross the street or turn away. It all varies with the period, and I suppose I've gotten used to it."

"During the McCarthy period, when I got a lot of notoriety as a witness before the senator's

committee, I, myself, would never say hello to anybody I knew casually — even to some of my relatives — for fear it might embarrass them or create difficulties for them. But, generally, people have treated me well. My neighbors show no hostility and I don't feel deprived socially."

Aptheker has spoken at universities of various sizes and kinds all over the country, by invitation and usually for a fee.

Aptheker said that he has been subjected to little actual violence although stones were thrown at him at several Southern colleges about 10 years ago because of his racial views. Other known Communists, he said, have been the targets of more physical assault.

Aptheker served with the field artillery in World War II, saw combat in Europe and ended with the rank of captain.

"About a year or two after I left the Army — I think it was in 1947 — I got a letter from the Army telling me my commission in the Reserve had been revoked. They gave me 26 reasons. The reasons all added up to the fact that I was regarded as subversive and seditious."

"Ironically, in all the time I was in the service, I never made a secret of my communism. Now and then, I wrote for the New Masses. After the war, I hadn't changed but the climate had."

(Asked for comment on this, an Army spokesman in Washington said, "as a matter of policy we do not disclose the reasons for a man's discharge or separation from the service. This is considered a matter of personal privilege.")

Among other difficulties that face known Communists, Aptheker said, is that no member of the party on trial can get bail money from professional bondsmen. He said he didn't know why this was so. He did not

mention the fact that several celebrated Communist defendants have been known to jump bail.

Aptheker said American Communists occasionally have difficulty getting auto or fire insurance. "There is a tendency not to give it or, if it is given, to withdraw it. I've had trouble getting auto insurance despite a good safety record. Why? I guess they think we're poor risks."

The FBI, Aptheker said, has trailed him on various occasions, the most recent being when he went to Oakland, Calif., to join the anti-Viet Nam march there. How did he know it was the FBI?

"They made no secret of it. At times, they've had a car in front of mine and one behind. They're easily recognized, when they want to be. They dress alike, they look alike, none of them is fat, and they act alike."

"In other cases I know about, the FBI has gone to a man's employer and said, 'Do you know this man is a Communist?' Their purpose is to harass him, to make life difficult, to keep up the pretense that Communists are engaged in a criminal conspiracy and the cops are after them."

(Aptheker's remarks about the FBI were cited to an FBI spokesman in New York for comment. The FBI man listened, paused and said, "No comment.")

Economically, Aptheker says, he has suffered for his political convictions. As a young man, he says, he was blackballed from teaching. He has written 18 books, none of them published by a major house.

Aptheker said his income derives from writing, lecturing and directing the American Institute for Marxist Studies in Manhattan. The institute, according to its literature, is supported and attended by Communists and non-Communists and disclaims any political purpose. It was in his office at the institute that he was interviewed.

Aptheker was born in Brooklyn, where he still lives with his wife. His father was a cutter in the garment district and later a manufacturer. The son, one of five children, says he grew up in moderate, lower-middle class circumstances, "in a house of love" and had a "glorious childhood."

It was the depression that turned him toward communism while a student at Columbia University.

He says he was also heavily influenced by a trip through the South in the '30s when he saw

"indescribable things — starved kids, black and white, with bloated bellies and rickety legs, and the brutal treatment of Ne-

The Apthekers have one child, Bettina, 21, a student at the University of California, who has been active in the demonstrations there. Bettina recently was identified by the New York Times as "the foremost ingenue of the Communist party."

She herself had announced she was a member. She later told an interviewer she had come to communism of her own accord, without persuasion or dissuasion from her parents.

She talked exuberantly of her childhood in Flatbush and of her family's visitors. Among them was the late Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, once head of the party — Herbert Aptheke spoke at her funeral service in Moscow in 1964 — and W. E. B. DuBois, who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and later became a Communist. DuBois died in Ghana at 93.

Aptheke's special interest as a writer is Negro history. He says he goes out on lectures as "an historian and scholar, not a Communist. If it helps the party, fine; if not, okay." He said he joins protest demonstrations as an individual and not as a result of party discipline.

He denied party discipline exists in that sense and said

members are free to join or quit, free to disagree with party programs, that Communists are not rigid in their thinking and, incidentally, there are no "card-carrying members"; cards are no longer issued.

"We are less naive than in the

past. We tended to minimize the difficulties of building socialism, of the problems of power and the approach to religion and nationalism. The need for fresh thinking in our party has been apparent for 10 or 12 years. Like

other people, we have had to grow.

He said the party in America reached a high point in 1938 with a membership of 80,000, that it declined by 1959 to a low point of about 7,500 as a result of the "cold war, intensive gov-

ernment prosecutions, McCarthyism, the events of 1956, which shook many members loose, and by the general affluence in the United States, where many people say communism here just doesn't make sense."