ONE

World of Our Sons

"Forty thousand Jewish workers in one city, each living on his ten fingers!" an amazed Phillip Davis, a Russian–Jewish immigrant, wrote of his early days in turn-of-the-century New York City. Since the mass immigration from eastern Europe and Russia had begun in the 1880s, the city's garment industry had employed hundreds of thousands of fingers relentlessly, and, some would say, without pity. Brutish hours and working conditions in Lower East Side tenement sweatshops ground down human life into an existence of mindless survival, without much chance to experience any other aspects of life. Reflecting on how he had abandoned his former religious commitments under the assault, Davis noted that "[i]mmediately upon entering the sweatshop[,] I seemed to have plunged into a struggle so intense that it absorbed all my energy and simply incapacitated me from any other normal human activity." Life, or what made life human, was impossible "because my work consumed it all."[1]

On July 3, 1891, somewhere in the mass of Jewish immigrants from Russia who were headed for the sweatshops, stood Harry Pressman, twelve years old and a refugee from Minsk. His parents had not registered his birth in the old country in order to protect him, if possible, from forced military service. As he approached conscription age, however, he fled to the United States to ensure avoidance of the Russian military and, according to his son Irving, to "seek his fortune." In short order, he, as had Davis and so many others, found his way into the garment industry of New York City where "he became pretty handy with a sewing machine." Though entirely devoid of education other than religious training, over the next decade and a half he was

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able, through hard work, perseverance, and perhaps good fortune, to accumulate sufficient capital to become a garment employer himself. Soon that economic prosperity enabled Harry to take a wife, Clara, a young woman he had known slightly in Minsk, the sister of a good friend. On July 1, 1906, their first child Leon (Lee) was born, followed by their second child Irving, seven years later.[2]

If Harry Pressman's life experience was part and parcel of the "world of our fathers," to use the title of Irving Howe's evocative study of that immigration era, Lee Pressman's life experience was to become centered in the "world of our sons." A good deal of *that* world involved cultural assimilation into the new country and intense pursuit of the promise of social mobility. Pressman's father climbed into the ranks of the *petty bourgeoisie* by becoming a manufacturer of silk ribbons for ladies' head wear. Even so, he remained, as did so many other immigrants, "caught in the grip of the old world, the old ways," wrote Howe. Having achieved some advancement in America, Harry Pressman's generation stayed "trapped in the limitations of their skills, in the skimpiness of their education, in the awkwardness of their speech, in the alienness of their manners." Not so for their sons and daughters! The culture of New York's Lower East Side thus "became a culture utterly devoted to its sons," Howe noted. "Onto their backs it lowered all its aspirations and delusions, expecting that the children of the New World would reach the goals their fathers could not reach themselves."[3]

Bright and Clean and Polished

For many of the new generation, exalted aspirations could prove a psychological burden. "The Jewish child in America grows in a complex of social relationships," wrote social worker Pauline Young in *Social Forces*. The "child is placed at an early age in an environment which is characterized by detachment from the simpler primary group relations, and the high degree of mobility encourages his 'escape' from family and communal control." In America, Jewish children attended public schools, whose objective was not "to make better Jews" but "better American citizens." "The children learn a new and different moral code through their associations at public school," Young contended. "They begin to live simultaneously in two different worlds: their home, their religious and communal life represent one culture, and the public school and the larger community represent another."[4]

Indeed, it was in and through the process of public education that many immigrant parents hoped for their family's future. "My father and mother worked in a rage to put us above their level," wrote Alfred Kazin in his poignant memoir of his New York City youth, *A Walker in the City*. "We were

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the only conceivable end to all their striving; we were their America." It was no wonder, then, that to Jewish immigrant parents, the predominantly Anglo–Saxon teachers of the New York City school system "were to be respected like gods."

> They were the delegates of all visible and invisible power on earth—of the mothers who waited on the stoops every day after three for us to bring home tales of our daily triumphs; of the glacially remote Anglo-Saxon principal, whose very name was King; of the incalculably important Superintendent of Schools who would someday rubberstamp his name to the bottom of our diplomas in grim acknowledgment that we had, at last, given satisfaction to him, to the Board of Superintendents, and to our benefactor the City of New York—and so up and up, to the government of the United States and to the great Lord Jehovah Himself.[5]

However, "[I]t was never learning I associated with that school," Kazin reminisced, "only the necessity to succeed, to get ahead of others in the daily struggle to 'make a good impression' on our teachers." Kazin perceived that it was not only his performance that teachers evaluated, but his *character*, that is, his ability to acculturate to "American" ways. The teachers' rule books remorselessly recorded both academic results and behavioral appropriateness. "We had to prove that we were really alert, ready for anything, always in the race," he recalled. Proper deportment proved to be as important as intelligence. The refined use of the English language was prized by the teachers above all, a language not naturally spoken by children born of immigrant parents who spoke little, if any, English at home. "This English was peculiarly the ladder of advancement. Every future young lawyer was known by it," wrote Kazin. "It was bright and clean and polished. . . . When the teacher sharply called a question out, then your name, you were expected to leap up, face the class, and eject those new words fluently off the tongue." Consequently, Kazin "felt that the very atmosphere of learning that surrounded us was fake—that every lesson, every book, every approving smile was only a pretext for the constant probing and watching of me, that there was not a secret in me that would not be decimally measured" and noted.[6]

The language factor was particularly important in separating the "world of our fathers" from the "world of our sons." "The English language is a strange vehicle of expression to the parents," observed Pauline Young. "To the child, however, the English language is a native tongue, he learns it during his childhood simultaneously imbibing American customs which become second nature to him at an early age." The parents' difficulty with the language and their accents "symbolize 'Europe' to the child's mind," sometimes even gen-

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erating a sense of shame in the child about the parent. In many Jewish homes, as in the Pressman's, Yiddish was spoken and often the children did not learn it sufficiently to enable easy communication with their parents. Consequently, when "the father no longer finds intercourse possible with his sons," a Jewish father reported to Young, "[m]uch is left unsaid." It was not that most Jewish parents would have preferred it another way. The "sickening invocation of 'Americanism' in the public schools, the word itself accusing us of everything we apparently were not," Kazin reflected, suggested to him that both our "families and teachers seemed tacitly agreed that we were somehow to be a little ashamed of what we were. And that there was shame in this was a fact that everyone seemed to believe as a matter of course."[7]

Thus, second generation Jews often developed ambivalencies. In order to assimilate fully into America, they had to reject and even be somewhat ashamed of their heritage as Jews, the more fully the better. At the same time, doing so did not satisfy many. Their ethnic heritage, no matter how they felt about it, or how they tried to leave it behind for periods in their lives, was a part of themselves to which many ultimately returned for comfort. Again, Kazin put it most eloquently: "So it was: we had always to be together: believers and non-believers, we were a people; I was of that people. Unthinkable to go one's own way, to doubt or to escape the fact that I was a Jew." "The American Jew is torn between two sets of values," wrote political sociologist Charles Liebman, "those of integration and acceptance into American society and those of Jewish group survival. . . . [The] behavior of the American Jew is best understood as his unconscious effort to restructure his environment and reorient his own self-definition and perception of reality so as to reduce the tension between these [incompatible] values."[8]

Lee Pressman's life and career epitomized these tensions. As Harry and Clara Pressman prospered, they were able to take a comfortable, middle-class apartment on the edge of the Lower East Side. The Pressman millinery factory was in the heart of New York City at 24th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Harry, a slight, quiet, and gentle man, primarily occupied himself with his business and "had very little to do with his children," Irving recollected. Clara's role as child rearer and guardian of the family's social advancement expanded. Irving Pressman remembered his mother as "a very forceful woman" who constantly pushed the children to excel in education, buying chairs and desks to ensure the ability to study fruitfully. Her role as primary overseer of the children was a common one. Immigrant Jewish mothers "particularly look upon" the children "with great pride," wrote Young in her study, "and welcome the newer family ideals which command greater respect for women than traditionally enjoyed by them in the old country." "My mother took care of the children," according to Irving, "and she was very intimate with us" emotionally, despite her forcefulness in certain matters.[9]

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This was the case even more so with Lee, her eldest, than Irving, for in his early years young Lee contracted infantile paralysis that withered the muscles in one of his legs. "I might say that there was an affinity between my mother and my brother," Irving reflected, "because as a young child he had polio . . . and she didn't want to have him with crutches" that would make him feel inadequate. "So she carried him everywhere he went."[10]

The doctors had told Clara Pressman that her firstborn son "was never going to be able to . . . use his legs," according to Lee Pressman's oldest daughter, Ann Pressman. Clara, though, "was bound and determined to figure out a way that he would be able to walk. She went everywhere she could think to go, and to every doctor she could go to" for help, until she found a surgeon who performed a tendon transplant enabling Lee to walk. For the first five years or so of his life, though, Clara, physically robust in her youth but barely five feet tall, literally carried her child everywhere the family went. As a result, the bond between Clara and Lee was even deeper than the normal fondness for the firstborn. "Every firstborn Jewish son is always a potential Messiah," to the family, remarked Lee Pressman's middle daughter Marcia, years later. The affliction of his early years and Clara's maternal commitment to her son strengthened their feelings for each other even more.[11]

Evidently, Clara also bequeathed her forcefulness, determination, discipline, and zest for life to Lee as well. "She and Dad both had a real little sparkle in their eye," Ann recalled, "so when you talked to them, they had this little light, this sparkle. . . ." Clara's aspirations for Lee did not stop with walking unaided. Her pressure for educational achievement was intense on both sons, Irving noted, though she did not have to press Lee to study and read as much as her youngest son. While the surgery enabled him to participate in a few street sports, the polio and surgery had left "one leg considerably less formed" than the other. This left young Lee with a limp as a child—an affliction which he always consciously attempted to hide in later years—and which subjected him to the taunts, name-calling, and meanness of other children. "I think . . . he suffered extremely acute humiliations as a child," Marcia judged. Irving seconded this opinion; as a youngster he remembered his older brother as a studious bookworm until he attended Stuyvesant High School, where he engaged in a few track events and made the swim team, "despite his adversity." Lee Pressman himself claimed parental pressure resulted in his academic advancement. "The folks were rather strict about" keeping him focused on his school progress, and tried "to follow a path of keeping a youngster reading, tending to his studies, and looking to college and into a profession." "The natural result," Lee observed, "was considerable reading."[12]

In fact, his studiousness put him in high school at an early age as he graduated from grammar school at age twelve and a half. In high school he took violin lessons and, for a period while studying for his bar mitzvah,

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became intrigued by Judaism. Irving remembers his brother putting on the phylactery bindings for prayer every day before going to school. However, Lee later told an interviewer that for most of his life he had not taken his religious training very seriously, and, in fact, when asked if he ever believed in an omnipotent God, responded "I should say not really." The early flirtation with his religion's traditions could not have come from either Clara or Harry, according to both Irving and Lee, as both parents were essentially secular Jews in America and were not especially observant. "I just went through the typical training for preparation for the bar mitzvah, and after that no actual training, just an occasional attendance of synagogue, at special holidays, with my father," Lee later recalled. The family did, however, participate in celebrating the holidays from time to time.[13]

In 1919, shortly after Lee entered high school, the Pressman family left the Lower East Side. They moved to a Jewish section of suburban Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, acquiring along the way, as evidence of their rising standard of living, a Stutz automobile. The detached Bensonhurst house on 80th Avenue was built of stucco and was roomy, leading to a pleasant change in living conditions for the Pressmans. The neighborhood kids played stickball, football, and skated in the streets; it was rare, though, to find gentile playmates. While he could have transferred to a different school, Lee insisted on completing his high school studies at Stuyvesant in Manhattan. Nor did he expect that his studies were finished when he graduated. He knew that his mother ardently wished him to pursue a professional career, either in law or medicine. The latter profession did not appeal to him. They did not consider a career in the family business. "That topic never came up in our family discussions," Lee told an interviewer years later. "It was always assumed that I would go to college and to a professional school. Business had too many vagaries, too many ups and downs. It was always the aspiration of a Jewish parent to have something better" for their children. When he completed Stuyvesant in 1922 at the age of sixteen, Pressman entered New York University's Washington Square College, later transferring to Cornell University.[14]

Entering college at sixteen probably reinforced Pressman's personality bent toward discipline, hard work, and achievement, which had been instilled by his mother. He did quite well academically. Because "I was rather young in the classes that I was in," he reflected, "there wasn't as much social activity or sports as one would find if he were at a natural age in physical development." Not that Washington Square College, located then on the fourth floor of the American Depository Book Company, was a sports powerhouse. In those years the school remained small; Lee's class was the first large class to come in, with approximately 150 to 200 students. "Most of the comradeship was done on the fourth floor," Lee's friend Jacob Rabkin recalled. "It was

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a very intimate group of people because we were thrown in together on the fourth floor and we saw each other very often" during class changes and locker socializing. Rabkin remembers Pressman as being very handsome, charming, and articulate. Evidently Lee's potential for academic achievement caught the eye of Dr. Munn, a professor of English literature who went on to become dean. Munn encouraged Lee to consider transferring to Cornell for his sophomore year and assisted the young man in obtaining scholarship money.[15]

Despite their general middle-class status, business fortunes limited the Pressman family's ability to help financially with their eldest son's higher education. This was especially true after the early 1920s, when the elder Pressman sold his garment business and undertook a partnership in a restaurant–hotel across from Madison Square Garden. The restaurant business was one that Harry Pressman knew nothing about, according to his son Irving, but perhaps he hoped it would be less volatile than garment manufacturing. The struggle to make the new enterprise a success, combined with the tuition and rooming costs needed for Lee to attend Cornell, forced his parents to seek outside help. In 1925, the year before he graduated from Cornell, Lee applied for and received the George C. Boldt Memorial Scholarship. In his application he noted that his part-time dishwashing work and summer work as a counselor, with the assistance his parents were able to afford, totaled approximately 50 percent of the money he needed for his tuition.[16]

Cornell and Harvard

Thus, Lee Pressman, firstborn son of immigrant Jewish parents of modest income, began his academic work at Cornell. Lee's experiences at the school over the next two years brought him two passions: his wife and his life's work. Sophia Platnik (nicknamed Sunny) was, like Lee, a Jew from New York's Lower East Side, but from a poorer family. In terms of other riches, though, Joseph and Minnie Plotnick's daughter had been blessed. "My mother was a very beautiful lady, very feminine," recalled daughter Marcia. Lee himself had matured into quite a handsome man by the time he had turned twenty. Standing six feet tall and weighing 175 pounds, he had the upper body muscularity of a wrestler, dark curly hair, angular features, and slightly arched eyebrows that sharpened his gaze; he was then, and remained afterward, very attractive to women. In this case, however, he was the pursuer of the romance and the infatuated lover, Sunny, for a time, the reluctant but interested target of his affections. A woman of great intellectual and artistic talents, who often kept them hidden, she studied languages intensively—Russian, French, and especially Hebrew. "She was one of the few first generation children born in

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this country that pursued her Jewish studies to the extent," Marcia said. She essentially completed the essentials of a rabbinical training though, as a woman, she could never become a rabbi. Once she decided that she too was interested romantically in Lee, the couple spent a considerable amount of time together, both on campus and as summer camp counselors. When Lee graduated from Cornell in 1926 and moved on to Harvard Law School, Sunny stayed at Cornell until her graduation in 1928.[17]

In terms of Lee's additional passion—his profession—Cornell also provided the intellectual seed that eventually bore fruit in Pressman's later career as a lawyer representing the labor movement. During Lee's years at Cornell, labor economist Sumner Slichter taught at the school. After taking his course in elementary economics in his sophomore year, as a junior Pressman signed up for the professor's course on the history of trade unionism. "He was a very excellent teacher," recollected Lee years later, "and got me really basically interested in the activities of trade unions." In his senior year he became a grading assistant for the professor. "In terms of my life activity," Pressman recalled in hindsight, it was Slichter and Cornell, not Harvard Law School, that gave him a focus and an outlet for his social idealism.[18]

Obviously, something about Slichter's course and the subject of trade unionism struck a responsive chord in Lee Pressman. As a young adult his personality contained evidence of a romanticized social idealism; this found expression in his desire to have his life's work accomplish something positive about the injustices of the world, certainly not an uncommon trait in young people. His brother Irving remembered that Lee was always intellectually interested in economics and political–economic reform, even in high school.[19]

On the other hand, intense parental demands for career success also shaped his personality. He felt a responsibility to the family to succeed as a Jewish son of Jewish immigrant parents. This resulted in a driving ambition intense enough to put some people off. Years afterward, when the FBI began investigating his role in the Hiss–Chambers case, agents interviewed an anonymous source who appeared to be an acquaintance of Lee's at Cornell. Pressman, he recalled, was "a brilliant student and one who was respected for his ability," the source said. The informant, however, "disliked the subject's personality" because he thought he was "an opportunist" in the pursuit of academic and professional success. This also was not an uncommon reaction in Jewish children in whom immigrant parents had instilled such ambition, ambition that sometimes put off non-Jews and enhanced their anti-Semitism. As an Anglo–Saxon teacher reported to Pauline Young, "Mentally the Jewish children are the backbone of my class, but they can be an unsufferable nuisance because of their constant desire to distinguish themselves, and that's why they are not very popular" among their schoolmates.[20]

It was quite likely that Pressman encountered such anti-Semitism at

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both Cornell and Harvard. The Anglo–Saxon-dominated world of professional schooling was uneasy with the professional ascension of Jews; many institutions of higher learning at the time, especially the Ivy League schools, even began imposing restrictions on their admission. At Cornell, the rural residents of upstate New York regarded Jews from New York City as taking "their" slots at the school, since they believed it was their lobbying that had resulted in state funding, entitling them to special consideration. This anti-Semitism extended into social life as traditional fraternities refused to recruit Lower East Side Jews, no matter how bright, articulate, and ambitious.

Therefore, Lee, as did twenty-eight of his urban compatriots, joined the local chapter of *Omicron Alpha Tau*, a Jewish fraternity. In the fraternity, some noted Lee's developing political idealism. Pressman and a number of his fraternity brothers were regarded as somewhat "pink," an FBI interviewee who knew Pressman in these years recounted later. These students were "described as intellectually interested and somewhat 'starry-eyed' about Socialism, Marxism, and Leninism and the Soviet experiment," the bureau investigative report detailed. They "would indicate their feelings and sympathies for the most part at 'bull sessions,'" according to the informant, who did reflect that such interest among college students was perhaps not all that unusual. He "wished to point out that his statements as to the 'pinkish' group should be considered in the light of the times and should also take into consideration the age of the students." Thus, first generation Jewish students were never far from social tensions grounded in ethnic, class, and perhaps even ideological considerations. "While they have the same civil privileges and encounter no legal restrictions," wrote Pauline Young, "they find it frequently impossible to conceal their origin. The attitudes of other people are such that they compel them to realize that they are Jews, and that they belong 'where they come from.'"[21]

The physical affliction of polio—which sensitized him to the injustices the world can heap on the innocent—and the parental demands for professional success—which gave him a driving ambition difficult to hide—combined to make it appear that Lee Pressman was a young man who was interested in doing something to rid the world of injustices, even as he benefited himself. Further, his quick mindedness intimidated people and sometimes led him to become impatient with the slower witted. His intellectual talents, however, did not usually run to original thought. Lee Pressman processed information strategically, and his thought naturally ran to tactical questions. His was a mind that could see well in advance the possibilities inherent in a situation and what one could do to achieve one's objectives. "Fundamentally, you can classify Jewish minds in two groups," remarked Pressman's close work associate Harold Ruttenberg, himself a Jew. "One is the deep prophetic intellectual mind. The other is the operational mind. Pressman was the operational

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mind. . . . [H]e was intellectual in a way, but he wasn't intellectual in that his interests were catholic. They were specific and narrow."[22]

When Pressman entered Harvard Law School in 1926 he thus had qualities well suited to the professional world of law. He chose Harvard, he later told an interviewer, largely because it was one of the few law schools requiring an undergraduate degree for admission, and this exclusiveness seemed significant. Even for a bright student, a Harvard legal education proved challenging, requiring a tremendous amount of work and self-discipline—even more so for Pressman because he had to tutor other students for tuition money, as he had at Cornell. He excelled at such discipline, though, and finished second in his class academically. He also served on the *Harvard Law Review* in his second and third years, a coveted position; he became case note editor in his senior year, the second most influential position on the *Review*. An acquaintance at the time "found him to [be] very active and very able," FBI agents wrote of their investigative interview with someone who knew Lee during his time at Harvard. "He stated that he was energetic and showed a great deal of ability to stick with a hard problem until he reached a conclusion on it." There were many such problems for the aspiring lawyer. "[P]ractically your entire life during your second and third year revolves around the law review," he remembered years afterward. "Your ordinary course work you take in stride." Aside from frequent courtship letters to Sunny, he had little free time. When "you're at Harvard Law School and you're trying to make the Law Review and then you're on the Law Review there are very few interests outside of your law school work that you become involved with." Even so, he occasionally did find a bit of time for family visits. "He saved up enough money from his tutoring to invite me to come to visit him at law school for one of the football games," remembered Irving, who arrived chaperoned by a female cousin. Lee proudly gave him a tour of the school's campus. [23]

However, at Harvard, Lee also found social exclusion based on ethnicity and class. He did not find the same acceptance—as a Russian Jew who had to tutor to make ends meet—as the sons of the non-Jewish, old wealth elitists or the gentrified Americans who were staking out their places in American society, students, for example, such as Alger Hiss. Hiss served with Pressman on the *Harvard Law Review*, and the latter in fact directed his work on the *Review*. In later interviews, Pressman made it known, with visible feeling, that he and Alger did not travel in the same "social circles" at Harvard. Hiss became a pet of Professor Felix Frankfurter. He had descended from a Baltimore family that had social pretensions even though it was, before and during Alger's day, suffering downward social mobility for a number of reasons. Pressman, obviously, was not a part of the same "shabby-genteel" social strata as Hiss. Frankfurter, a German Jew, was a nortorious social climber. While he could sometimes form bonds of sponsorship with lower-class Jewish students

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who fed his ego with intellectual idolatry, Frankfurter did not take to Pressman as he did to Hiss and a few other Jewish students. For years afterward, Pressman felt this sense of slight.[24]

Despite his interest in unions and the labor movement, Pressman had not had the opportunity to take a labor law course, since the school only initiated such a course in his third year. By then he was far too tied up with the *Law Review* work to take it. He had had Professor Frankfurter for administrative law, however, and Frankfurter—the celebrated defender of Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti—had garment union ties and had written a book on the antiunion use of judicial injunctions. Lee approached "the most colorful and controversial member of the faculty," as Alger Hiss later characterized Frankfurter, for advice on how to start a law practice focusing on representing unions. Outside of one or two firms representing the garment unions in New York City, there were hardly any labor-side law firms in the country in those days. Frankfurter, however, had participated in litigating several Amalgamated Clothing Worker cases involving labor injunctions and had ties with several New York City lawyers that he had worked with on those cases. "About my second or third year I called on Felix and told him I wanted to go into the labor law field and did he have any idea about what I could do to get into such a field. He said, 'My advice to you is very simple. First, get to be a good lawyer and then you'll have no trouble, if you want to, representing labor unions.'" He did give Pressman a letter of recommendation to the New York firms handling the garment union cases, but nothing came of it.[25]

Other than this contact, Pressman was not one of Frankfurter's inner circle of favored students. Frankfurter had a reputation as a Progressive, but "his didactic style was challenging, even confrontational," wrote Hiss. Moreover, he "was cocky, abrasive, and outspoken." As a result, he "was not popular with the majority of his students. . . ." Hiss came to Harvard bearing a letter of introduction from William Marbury, a lawyer and friend of the Hiss family who knew Frankfurter. "As a result, I got invited to the Sunday teas" at the Frankfurter residence on Brattle Street, a highly prized badge of acceptance for those legal students aspiring to become part of the progressive legal intelligentsia. The teas were in fact semiorganized sessions of intellectual discourse, with Frankfurter acting as the "impresario and catalyst," bounding "from book to book, magazine to magazine" in his library, "like an adult Peter Pan" searching for a well-turned quote. Hiss's genteel bearing clearly attracted Frankfurter. "I remember Alger Hiss best of all for a kind of distinction that had to be seen to be believed," Pressman told journalist Murray Kempton years later. "If he were standing at the bar with the British Ambassador and you were told to give a package to the Ambassador's valet, you would give it to the Ambassador before you gave it to Alger. He gave you a sense of absolute command and absolute grace and I think Felix felt it more

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than anyone. He seemed to have a kind of awe for Alger," Lee observed. According to Harold Cammer, also a Harvard Law School graduate, Frankfurter's social climbing tended to cause him to favor non-Jewish students from what he perceived was the American gentility. He made an exception here or there for a poor Russian–Jewish student who fed the renowned professor's ego with adulation. Pressman, though, clearly one of the brightest of the class of 1929, and interested in pursuing a reform-minded legal career in an area in which Frankfurter had expertise, never received a Brattle Street invitation.[26]

Despite the slight, Pressman valued his training at Harvard—not so much for the substance of what he learned, but for the analytical skills imparted. "It wasn't the content of the course you were getting that was important," he later remarked. The analysis of cases and the Socratic teaching method practiced at the Ivy League law schools forced the students to separate facts from assumptions and relevancies from irrelevancies. He recollected that in his first year, one professor focused on a medieval case for an inordinately long time. "For three months we had been giving him our statement of facts and he would point out that we were overstating it or understating it. You would say, 'This is a fact of the case,' and he would say, 'Where do you find this?' 'Well, I assume this,' you would say, and he would say, 'I didn't ask you what you assumed. I asked you to state the facts.' When we got through with that case," he remembered, "every single person in that class had been trained. If he were ever given a statement of facts to read, he could tell you what the facts were." As a by-product, the "second important lesson, at least for me[,] was that you learned to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant," an ability that he prized for the rest of his life. "[I]t's been my guidepost—in your ordinary relationships, in your professional relationships," he informed the interviewer. "And by and large I have found that when you see a person who can" separate relevancies from irrelevancies, "you have a person with a fairly clear mind."[27]

Thus, Harvard Law School bequeathed to Pressman analytical skills that served him well professionally for the rest of his life. However, that mindset from time to time could also lead him to be too coldly analytical and excessively devoted to logic and rationalizations. Even so, the mastery of those analytical skills were what many law firms were looking for when hiring young graduates from the first-rank law schools. Like many others in his class, he made the rounds of the big Wall Street law firms in New York around Christmas of his senior year. "These big firms snap up the *Law Review* men," Pressman remembered. "You can take your choice of the one you want." Pressman found his home at the firm of Chadbourne, Stanchfield, and Levy, "at what we considered then . . . a very fancy salary." The bar exam followed in June, and he started work in September 1929.[28]

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Wall Street Law Practice and the Depression

The Chadbourne firm specialized in corporate reorganizations and receiverships, but also had a varied general corporate practice representing such large companies as Anaconda Copper and American Tobacco. Pressman at first found himself doing "a little bit of everything," except that there "was no trial work attached to it." Shortly after he arrived, the firm assigned him to a senior lawyer for mentoring. That attorney was Jerome Frank. In the following year, Frank would become a leading light of the "legal realism" movement—an academic school arguing that "law" was socially determined and not rationally divined—with the publication of his treatise *Law and the Modern Mind*.[29]

Jerome Frank, originally born in New York City of German–Jewish heritage, grew up in Chicago. By 1928, he had become a prominent lawyer in that city and "quickly came to be recognized as one of the nation's leading corporate reorganization lawyers," according to his biographer Robert J. Glennon. In spite of his corporate law practice, he always maintained broad artistic, intellectual, and progressive political interests. Family concerns, however, caused him to return to the city of his birth. He moved to New York City "out of concern for his daughter, Barbara, who suffered intermittently from a psychosomatic paralysis of the legs," and who was then undergoing psychoanalysis with a New York doctor. Frank encountered the young Lee Pressman not long after arriving at Chadbourne. "After I had been there a few weeks he wrote a memorandum and gave an oral statement about an intricate legal problem that quite delighted me," recollected Frank. He resolved then to take "him on as my cub."[30]

Frank, a man with "bright, piercing blue eyes, a broad mouth, a high, sloping forehead, an olive complexion, and sparse-medium brown hair" was a very charismatic figure to young lawyers, recalled John Abt, his "cub" at his Chicago firm. Even so, from the first, his relationship with Pressman seemed to run in the opposite direction, with Frank somewhat fascinated by the young man. "I would say that he" was "probably the best lawyer that I've ever met," Frank reflected many years afterward. He "was the quickest legal mind I ever encountered . . . quick, sure, and ingenious. As it turned out, he was also a man of great executive ability." Thus began a relationship between Pressman and an older sponsor that was to find replication in later years with his ties to John L. Lewis and Philip Murray. He "always had somebody behind him who was pushing him" professionally, observed his brother Irving. As a youth he had had responsibilities far in advance of his chronological age; he was always in advance of his age group in school and later professionally. Indeed, it was remarkable that Frank, himself something of a *wunderkind*, could be so enamored of the young Lee Pressman.[31]

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On a more personal level, Lee and Sunny continued their long courtship and engagement. After returning to New York, Pressman lived at home and turned over his earnings to his mother, who saved a nest egg for him. Harry Pressman's restaurant business, however, had fallen on tough economic times a year or so before Lee had graduated from Harvard. According to Irving, the enterprise collapsed due to his father's lack of experience at managing that type of business. Nevertheless, the family was somehow able to make ends meet, and on June 28, 1931, Lee and Sunny were married. Since the bride's family did not have enough money to pay for the wedding, Lee's mother arranged to have the reception held at the St. Maritz Hotel. The young couple moved to the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, visited with the Frank family at their home in Croton-on-Hudson, and generally settled into the lifestyle suitable for an up-and-coming Wall Street lawyer.[32]

The advancing economic depression, however, interceded. Through the early 1930s, financial hard times had left Lee Pressman and others like him generally untouched—corporate receivership and reorganization work was, after all, plentiful at that time. Even so, many of these young professionals could not ignore the human miseries around them and those groups that were among the first to try to do something about the misery—groups such as the American Communist Party, for example. As Alfred Kazin recalled the streets of New York City in the depths of the Great Depression, he often encountered "the nude shamed look furniture on the street always had those terrible first winters of the depression. . . ." We "stood around each newly evicted family to give them comfort and the young Communists raged up and down the street calling for volunteers to put the furniture back and crying aloud with their fists lifted to the sky." Pressman, with his own sensitivity to injustice, must also have glimpsed more than one scene where communists seemed to be the only individuals trying to rectify the misery of the helpless.

Increasingly, the events that surrounded young lawyers—particularly those from Pressman's social milieu—began to force them to question the viability of the political and economic system as currently constructed under capitalism. Everyone, even young Wall Street lawyers, as Pressman's friend Jack Rabkin later recalled, searched for answers to the economic apocalypse that ground down millions of people. In that kind of context, corporate law practice began to become burdensome to attorneys motivated by some sense of social responsibility and idealism, such as Frank and Pressman. Frank, in particular, disliked the "factory" atmosphere of the large Chadbourne firm and questioned the ethical standards of some of its practices. Lee as well had come to believe that this type of legal work was not for him. Intellectually, he continued to pursue an outside interest in labor law through a loose association with a small legal publishing group, the International Juridical Association (IJA).[33]

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The American branch of the IJA owed its existence to Carol Weiss King, a Progressive lawyer long active in representing radicals and immigrants. The group's preamble clearly set out its focus: to combat "legislative, administrative, and judicial tyranny" against political dissenters by assisting progressive lawyers to more effectively represent clients—such as workers and unions, among others—who experienced wholesale violations of their civil liberties. This work was done largely through the publication of the *IJA Bulletin*. The publication contained "extensive coverage of political/constitutional cases and movements" and combined both "theory and practice" for those attorneys struggling to represent the downtrodden and the oppressed, according to King's biographer and IJA historian Ann Fagan Ginger. For the next ten years, the *Bulletin* chronicled many of the political, legislative, and legal events of the New Deal era.[34]

More important, the IJA placed lawyers of a Progressive mind-set into more intimate professional contact with each other. Many had started in corporate practice in New York after law school, but as a result of the Great Depression found themselves increasingly troubled professionally. Pressman's involvement came "probably through Shad Polier who was a classmate of mine at law school," he later thought. In addition to King and Polier (who became IJA Director), Joseph Kovner, "a very bright, able, decent and compassionate person among the sharks of the New York legal world," soon became the *Bulletin's* editor. Kovner (who later served Pressman as an assistant general counsel in the CIO), recruited Nathan Greene (also a Pressman classmate from Harvard, as well as a Frankfurter favorite) to help him do the major editorial work on the *Bulletin*. Pressman, among the earliest group of young attorneys recruited to the cause as "founding editors" of the IJA's publication, noted that the association "was no organization" when he started to work with the group. "It was just a little bulletin that was put out by the two persons at that time. . . . [W]e had about three or four of us . . . reading decisions of courts involving labor injunctions." In addition, "It was the only bulletin that was being put out . . . covering or concentrating on labor—on opinions and decisions of courts pertaining to labor problems," he commented. According to Pressman, "They worked as if they were working on a law review for a law school. They would submit law reports on important labor and civil rights cases" of interest to attorneys of a Progressive bent. The IJA's first published issue arrived on May 1, 1932, featuring discussions of both the *Scottsboro* civil liberties case and an analysis of the recently passed Norris–LaGuardia law prohibiting labor injunctions and "yellow-dog" contracts.

The bulletin soon attracted others. The IJA quickly became an influential networking association for progressive, civil liberty, labor-minded attorneys. Alger Hiss, then working in New York, also became involved, as did Pressman's friend and later law partner Nat Witt. Although Pressman and Witt

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had both attended New York University (NYU) in the early 1920s, Witt had not gone to Harvard Law School until about the time Pressman graduated in 1929; it was at the IJA where he and Pressman first became friends. Additional legal luminaries connected to the IJA included Tom Emerson, later National Labor Relations Board attorney and subsequent Yale law professor, and future Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas. All, in one way or another, wrote Ginger, had "been near the seats of power at Harvard and Wall Street," and therefore "had confidence in the power of their intellect to help bring about basic social change."[35]

While some of those affiliated with the IJA were in all likelihood communists, at this time it did not appear to others that Lee Pressman had more than a liberal orientation tinged with "pink" colorings. IJA member Jerome Hellerstein told Hiss defense attorneys years later that Pressman and Witt, whatever their later activities, "were not Communists, at least at that time." Similarly, Pressman's personal friend Jack Rabkin, who lived in the same neighborhood and knew Lee during those early years in New York City, supported this observation. "I don't think he was dominated by a leftist philosophy at that time," he recollected years later. Nevertheless, the group brought him into closer contact with much more radical streams of political and social opinion than he had probably been heretofore exposed, except perhaps briefly at Cornell. Nat Witt, for example, had been radicalized significantly earlier than Pressman due to the Sacco–Vanzetti case. Combined with the social agony of the advancing Great Depression, along with Pressman's own underlying personality, the IJA experience was an important step in preparing Pressman for the further activist commitments he was to make.[36]

The election of New York Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt in the fall of 1932 profoundly affected the career directions of both Jerome Frank and Lee Pressman in short order. The banking crisis and downward spiraling economy promised that the new Roosevelt administration was going to be one of legislative innovation and reform. In early 1933, Frank had been in contact with Pressman's old law professor Felix Frankfurter, who was then serving as a prime recruiter for the staffing of the early New Deal agencies. First promised a general counsel's job in the Department of Agriculture solicitor's office, a political patronage debt knocked Frank out of the competition. However, he had turned in his resignation at the Chadbourne firm so he had little choice but to remain in Washington and angle for another position. Shortly afterward, Frank began working with New Deal brain truster and Columbia professor Rexford Tugwell to shepherd the Agricultural Adjustment Bill (later Act) through Congress. Soon he began anticipating an appointment to that agency."[37]

It was clear that when Jerome Frank left for Washington he intended to take Lee Pressman with him, should he find a position in the New Deal. Once

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Frank left, his "cub" moved over to another small law firm, Liebman, Blumenthal, and Levy, because of dislike for the Chadbourne style of law practice. However, both Pressman and Frank knew the move was temporary; the chance to work on the anticipated social and economic reforms in Roosevelt's first hundred days was the prime objective for each. "The job is going to be even more interesting than I anticipated," Frank wrote to Lee in April 1933. "I suggest . . . that you send me letters showing your education experience, etc. Tugwell knows I am hoping to have you here with me and approves." He also asked Pressman to check with Alger Hiss and Nat Witt to test their eagerness to make connections in the coming New Deal. Pressman responded that he had informed both Hiss and Witt, "who are considering the matter. From the short experience I have had away" from the Chadbourne firm, he wrote to his mentor, "I am fully convinced that both you and I are never going to have, if possible, any similar yoke around our necks."[38]

From the Liebman firm Pressman handled a number of Frank's personal legal matters and waited for his invitation to Washington through the spring of 1933. "I am sitting on edge just waiting for news from you as to what's occurring," he wrote Frank in May. If nothing opened up in Washington, Pressman hoped something would develop nearer to home. In June he wrote Frank about a possible appointment with an anticipated U.S. Department of Labor investigation into labor racketeering among New York City AFL unions. "You know how much I am interested in getting into this phase of the investigation," he reminded Frank. Explaining that he had written one of the special attorneys appointed to work on the investigation—"offering my services in this connection"—he informed Frank that he had been told that staff assignments came through the Department of Justice headquarters. Perhaps Frank's new Washington contacts could help make that assignment come Pressman's way. "Is there any possible way of my getting into the task somehow?" he asked Frank. "I'd love to spend the next few months really hard at work on this problem since it really has been the most interesting available to date."

Still, the delay in starting up and staffing the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, to which by now Jerome Frank had been appointed general counsel, became increasingly difficult for Pressman to endure. "I understand what the situation probably is in Washington about new assistants," he wrote Frank in July 1933, "but I am exceedingly anxious to get to work with you." That chance finally came later that month. Frank "called me that I should come down" to Washington "and then when I came down . . . I became the assistant general counsel" in the AAA, Pressman remembered. He received a raise of several thousand dollars and, more important, he had moved into the swirling currents of American Progressive reform in the early days of the New Deal. Although long desired and much anticipated, this career move would

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have a profound impact on Lee Pressman's future life. Pressman, the first American-born son of Russian–Jewish immigrant parents, had overcome a difficult social milieu and climbed to personal and professional advancement in the United States. He had fused his quick-witted intelligence, extreme self-discipline, driving ambition, sensitivity to injustice, and romantic social idealism into a professional reward. He achieved what he thought would be a true position of power, a position that surely implied, if only subconsciously, some aspect of social acceptance. He soon learned that power in the New Deal was not what or where he had thought it would be. Ultimately, he would conclude that the capitalist system had generated political power inequities so great that real change would be impossible, as long as that system prevailed.[39]

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