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## Revisions in Red

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# Revisions in Red

By Laura Browder



Courtesy of Syracuse U.

A son of Earl Browder, who ran the Communist Party USA for many years, was photographed at a family reunion, probably in the late 1930s, by Browder's longtime driver, who turned out to be an FBI informant.

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hen I was in kindergarten and Hubert Humphrey was running against Richard Nixon, my mother told me that my grandfather had run for president too, on the Communist Party ticket. That surprised me, since I knew him as a mostly silent, pipe-smoking man whom we visited at Thanksgiving. I became fascinated by my grandfather's life, which took him from Kansas to Moscow, where he met my grandmother, to Shanghai and back to New York.

But by the time I wrote a book on the radical 1930s, I knew enough to take my family's concerns about privacy seriously. I immediately dismissed my editor's suggestion that I write an autobiographical preface. My grandfather's journey from the center of the American left to pariah status, his stints in prison, and his battles with McCarthy had left wounds in my family that I did not want to probe.

Earl Browder was the head of the Communist Party USA during its most influential period, the Great Depression. He coined the slogan "Communism is 20th-century Americanism." He ran for president twice against Franklin Roosevelt and appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1938. In 1946, on Stalin's orders, he was expelled from the Communist Party for revisionism. During those years, he was tracked by both the FBI and the KGB, and in the mid-1990s, the Venona project was published—a series of KGB cables that identified my grandfather as a Soviet spy.

I know these facts mainly from my reading. My father didn't like to talk much about his past, though occasionally, seemingly out of the blue, he would allude to an episode I knew nothing about, like the time when he was in college and the government jailed his mother, who was dying of cancer, and threatened to deport her back to the Soviet Union. His father had been imprisoned as well, and the couple had to spend a week in jail before the family could raise bail.

My knowledge was incomplete, and sometimes this ate at me, but I was afraid I could never really understand my grandfather's life, afraid that if I tried to tell it, I would get the story wrong.

And then I couldn't wait anymore. I was finishing a documentary for PBS, *The Reconstruction of Asa Carter*, and had enough money from a new job to begin a new project, and all the people who had known my grandfather were now in their 70s or 80s. I needed to talk to them. But before I did, I had to visit upstate New York.

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hen my grandfather was broke, during the 1960s, he had sold his papers, which ended up at Syracuse University. Objects from the past speak to us every day, but to find these things in numbered folders—my father's childhood drawings, a flier advertising my grandfather's speech at Madison Square Garden, my grandmother's letters to her husband in New York from Moscow in the late 1920s and early 30s,

where she and their boys were living on the verge of starvation—left me dizzy, caught between what was private and personal and what was public and historical.

The family photos were moving, as family photos often are, but sometimes in surprising ways. There was a wonderful series of a visit the family made to Earl's father. The images—my great-grandfather in his 90s, the small boys, a flock of white chickens—had been taken by my grandfather's longtime driver. As my father later told me, the driver was for years an FBI informant. My favorite picture was of my father as a child of maybe 8, wearing a sailor suit and squinting into the camera as he held up a hammer and sickle. When I gave him a copy for Christmas, he stared at it, shocked: He had no memory of the photo session, no idea that this image existed.

## **In his papers, I was caught between the personal and the historical.**

At times I would feel a great deal in common with my grandfather—reading his itineraries, noticing the books we both owned, skimming communications with his sons that reminded me of the messages I used to send my own kids from the road. But then I'd find a handwritten letter that Mao Zedong had sent to my grandfather, and he would seem once again like a character from history.

At times I felt uncomfortably close, as though I were intruding. When I read through Earl's letters to my grandmother from the Atlanta penitentiary, I was initially puzzled by the blurred patches on the documents: Were they signs of age? No, they were the stains left by her tears falling on the letters as she read them.

As I continued to work on the project, I was terrified of veering into either Old Left nostalgia or the kinds of harsh judgments that shut down understanding of the past. Most of all, Venona daunted me—the implication that my grandfather was a spy, a Soviet puppet.

Everyone I talked with had something to say about that issue. The Soviet historian David Brandenberger suspects that books such as *The Soviet World of American Communism* exaggerate the American Communist Party's dependence on Moscow.

My cousin Risa Browder posited that our grandfather had seen his sharing of information as internationalism, not treason. Maurice Isserman, a historian of American communism, told me, "Venona is the 800-pound elephant in the room."

I still don't know what I will find. Yet the deeper I delve, the more I am convinced that the Venona materials, whatever their significance, tell only one part of a very complex story.

Many of my worst fears have not been realized. Although my uncles agreed to a filmed interview as soon as I asked them, my father said no—and then yes. Then he changed his mind again. The day before I left town to interview my uncles, I talked to my dad on the phone and mentioned that I was heading to Princeton. "I'll see you there," he told me. I was floored.

I learned the story of my grandmother's first husband, a Red Army general who was executed by Stalin, and her anti-Bolshevik parents, who were among the first victims of Hitler's genocide after she pulled strings in the late 1920s to move them from the Soviet Union to Berlin. My father and uncles laughed about that trip to see their Uncle Waldo, Aunt Grace, and their grandfather on his Missouri farm full of chickens, which in the photos appear to be half the size of the boys—the trip that was so beautifully documented by the driver who turned out to be an FBI informant.

I left Princeton feeling both exhausted and exhilarated.

Last summer, at my father's 80th-birthday party, he received an unexpected gift from his brother: his Soviet birth certificate. On it, his mother's last name was one that no one recognized. My 12-year-old daughter filmed the scene on her cellphone while I watched my father and uncle squinting over the fragile brown paper. I was struck by the impossibility of finding definitive answers to the mysteries of the past and the desperate importance of trying anyway.

Laura Browder is a professor of American studies at the University of Richmond.