

# Two Invented Lives

March 21, 2010

[This article was published in *New Politics* No. 23, Summer 1997]

Review of HELLMAN AND HAMMETT, by Joan Mellen (HarperCollins, New York, 1996. 572pp. \$30.00 HB, \$13.00 PB)

Not for one instant the charming, deliciously insouciant Myrna Loy and William Powell of legendary *Thin Man* movie fame, Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman were, according to Joan Mellen's scrupulously researched biography, a pair of mismatched lovers; he, a compulsive womanizer, she, a compulsive liar. While most of the book is devoted to an in-depth analysis of their personal/sexual relationship, Mellen is very much concerned with their politics, as well. "A foremost literary fabulator of her generation," Mellen writes, "Lillian Hellman invented her life, so that by the end even she was uncertain about what had been true." The first biographer to have access to the Hellman papers which include those of Hammett's deposited in her archives, Mellen was in an excellent position to disprove many of the lies Hellman told about herself during her lifetime.

Hellman said she was never a member of the Communist Party. But she was. Not that that was a crucial bit of information. If she was not a member, she was a dues cheat and my suspicion is that even as a member, given her mythic avarice — she even appropriated the royalties Hammett left to his daughter — she probably didn't contribute that much. But, for years, she and Hammett gave something even more valuable than money to the Communist Party: they lent their celebrated names and prestige to every piece of CP skullduggery requiring a public whitewash.

Both supported the verdict of the 1938 Moscow purge trial as signatories to the petition "Leading Artists, Educators Support Soviet Trial Verdict," that appeared in the *New Masses* (May 3, 1938) which said about the Old Bolshevik defendants:

...they resorted to duplicity and conspiracy and allied themselves with long-standing enemies of the Soviet Union — nationalists who had ties with capitalist, fascist and White Guard Allies, and even with former czarist *agents provocateurs*. Degeneration may therefore be charged to the defendants, and not the Soviet Union, which gains strength internally and externally by the prevention of treason and the eradication of spies and wreckers.

Both signed an "Open Letter to American Liberals" warning them not to aid John Dewey's investigation of the charges against Leon Trotsky because it gave "support to fascist forces" and opposed asylum for Trotsky in the U.S. The statement denounced the "fantastic falsehood that the USSR and totalitarian states are basically alike." A week later the Hitler-Stalin Pact was signed.

The use of the Smith Act, making illegal "teaching and advocating the overthrow of the United States government by force and violence," to indict and jail the leaders of the Socialist Workers Party in 1941, met with CP approval and Hammett/Hellman silence.

In 1949 Hellman was one of the sponsors of the notorious Waldorf Conference, The Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, a joint Soviet-American venture whose official sponsor was the National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions (a CP front which, under a different name had tried to mobilize intellectuals for the 1948 Henry Wallace campaign.) When Norman Cousins

attacked the narrow group running the Conference for its refusal to include American intellectuals opposed to Soviet totalitarianism, Hellman replied irrelevantly but in the outraged tones of a *grande dame*: "I would recommend, Mr. Cousins, that when you are invited out to dinner you wait until you get home before you talk about your hosts."

She was still at it in 1969 when, according to Mellen, she told Dorothea Strauss that her husband was a "malefactor" because he published Solzhenitsyn. Mellen quotes her as saying "If you knew what I know about American prisons, you would be a Stalinist, too." Mellen continues, "American justice allowed her now to maintain good faith with the tyrant who had, despite his methods, industrialized the 'first socialist state.'" But her *grande dame* manner vanished when, as late as the late 70s, she said about George Orwell's magnificent Spanish Civil War memoir, *Homage to Catalonia*, that it was "a load of crap."

LILLIAN HELLMAN'S PERFORMANCE before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952 scripted by her notable social democratic, anti-Stalinist attorney, Joseph Rauh, accorded her iconic status. Rauh prepared a statement for her in which she declared herself ready to answer questions about herself, "But to hurt innocent people whom I knew years ago in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions..." A ringing statement. But she was well aware that the need to answer questions about herself would never arise. To remain silent about others required the use of the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination which, of course, she used. "She named no names," Mellen writes, "Otherwise her position was hardly worthy of the mantle of Joan of Arc she assumed after her ordeal was over."

After that, Hellman spent her time courting mainstream intellectuals, indulging her obsession with money. Systematically, Mellen says, she severed her old left-wing connections. "Now she did cut her conscience to suit the year's fashions," as she cut loose from the innumerable CP-front organizations using her name on their letterheads.

Her memoirs, particularly *Scoundrel Time*, published in 1976, Mellen writes,

rained upon Lillian Hellman torrents of incredulity. In this account of her travail under McCarthyism she seemed unregenerate in her Stalinism. Nor would she even now admit that she and Hammett were Communists. Fighting back, she accused liberal anti-Communists of attacking "radicals" rather than capitalists and imperialists. But she was at last being held accountable and it stung.

Hellman's publisher, Little Brown, backed out of its contract with Diana Trilling to publish a collection of her essays in which Trilling replied to Hellman's charges against her and her husband, Lionel. Hellman, the ultimate civil libertarian, demanded that Trilling agree to have her remarks about her edited. When Trilling refused, Hellman persuaded Little Brown not to publish her book. It was later published by Harcourt.

But worse was yet to come in the person of Mary McCarthy who had said publicly, "I think every word she writes is false, including 'and' and 'but'," a statement she repeated on the Dick Cavett show. In a rage, Hellman contacted her lawyer, noted civil libertarian Ephraim London, and demanded that he institute a suit against the Educational Broadcasting Company and Mary

McCarthy. Despite warning her that she would lose, Hellman insisted that he proceed. She, after all, was a millionaire and could easily stand the cost of a lawsuit while McCarthy had no money to speak of.

McCarthy started producing evidence of some of Hellman's lies, including her statements indicating that she knew nothing about the Moscow Trials. Hellman had, she pointed out, signed statements applauding the guilty verdict. But then she produced the most damaging of all Hellman's lies, the chapter in *Pentimento*, the second volume of her memoirs (later made into the film, *Julia* with Jane Fonda playing Hellman (Julia) to Vanessa Redgrave's anti-fascist activist), in which Hellman portrays herself heroically carrying money into Nazi Germany for her socialist activist friend. A complete fabrication. Hellman had appropriated the life of Muriel Gardiner who later told her own story in *Code Name Mary*, a story Hellman had learned from their mutual friend, lawyer Wolf Schwabacher. Told by London that she would have to produce evidence of the real Julia to proceed with her case against McCarthy, Hellman was frantic and became tangled in a web of additional lies. She actually had the chutzpah to plan to visit Muriel Gardiner to ask Gardiner to say that she was not Julia, a meeting that never came off. Hellman still hadn't thought her way out of her dilemma when McCarthy's attorneys' motion to have the case dismissed on the basis that Hellman was a public figure was denied. The case was scheduled to proceed. But it never did. Hellman died before that could happen.

LILLIAN HELLMAN WAS NOT ONLY A LIAR but, despite her disclaimers, an unregenerate Stalinist. In *Scoundrel Time* she wrote,

Communist-haters, particularly among intellectuals, wrote and talked a good deal about the violence they could suffer at the hands of American Communists ... but I think that was a very doubtful charge. About foreign gunmen I know only what I have read, but the American radicals I met were not violent men.

It is hard to believe, for example, that anybody could have thought of V. J. Jerome, the theoretician of the Party, as a man with a bomb or a gun.

To be sure, when Hellman wrote of "radicals" she didn't mean radicals at all. She meant the likes of V. J. Jerome, among others. Why should she have found it "hard to believe" that he could be thought of "as a man with a bomb or a gun"? Hellman admired his European counterparts, after all, and they not only used bombs and guns but were responsible for mass murder in those countries — the Soviet Union, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland — where they had power. They were totalitarian ideologues dependent on violence for the retention of power. Why should we believe that the difference between them and V. J. Jerome was anything more than an accident of geography?

Hellman said that "radicals" like herself had done no harm. She was mistaken. By promoting a totalitarian movement in the name of socialism, she and they had done enormous harm. They had impeded the development of an authentic socialist movement by distorting the basic concepts of socialism, promulgating the idea that a society based on the destruction of working class independence, on terror and the liquidation of millions was socialist. They not only distorted history but made a mockery of the American radical tradition.

Joan Mellen's exceptional biography, *Hellman and Hammett*, written from a left viewpoint, chronicles not only the tempestuous relationship of Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett but their love affair with Stalinism, as well.

Phyllis Jacobson *is the co-editor of New Politics.*