Anti-Communism, the FBI, and Matt Cvetic: The Ups and Downs of a Professional Informer

SWEAT-DRENCHED IN FEAR” is the phrase historian David Caute used to describe the mood of many Americans during the late 1940s and much of the 1950s. This era has been characterized as “an age of suspicions” during which “a national fetish with anti-Communism pervaded American society.” Historians have found that the resulting Cold War “Red scare” “weakened . . . civil liberties” and “impugned standards of tolerance and fair play.” Scholars of different political stripes have shown that political dissent nearly disappeared in the United States as “rampant” Red-baiting “narrowed the range of . . . utterances and ideas,” and as the “anti-Communist stance of the majority was translated into near-unanimity in the elected councils of the nation.”

This Red scare had many sources—among them the media, professional anti-Communists, and various governmental bodies and agencies (especially some congressional investigative committees and the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]). Although scholars disagree about the exact impact of these groups, they do acknowledge that such groups played an important role in fomenting and maintaining the kind of


1 David Caute, The Great Fear: the Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower (New York, 1978), 11; Guenther Lewy, The Cause That Failed: Communism in American Life (New York, 1990), 78; Stanley I. Kutler, foreword to Stephen J. Whitfield, The Culture of the Cold War (Baltimore, 1991), vii; ibid., 4; Richard M. Fried, Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective (New York, 1990), 164; M.J. Heale, American Anti-Communism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1930-1970 (Baltimore, 1990), 183. It may well be, as John Haynes succinctly put it, that “most Americans regarded Communism as they regard all politics and politicians, as just one of the many side shows in life” (Haynes to Leab, Nov. 18, 1990), but there was a hysteria abroad in the land that made the often irrational anti-Communism popular and powerful. For all its shortcomings, Carl Bernstein’s Loyalties: A Son’s Memoir (pbk. ed., New York, 1989) makes very clear the personal impact of what is perhaps a bit too grandiloquently described by him as “a national nightmare” (p. 11).

THE PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY
Vol. CXV, No. 4 (October 1991)
fervent anti-Communism that racked several cities. One such place was Pittsburgh, and one such Red baiter was Matt Cvetic. By looking over the career of Cvetic, a minor Communist party functionary who became one of Pittsburgh's most vociferous anti-Communists, it is possible to analyze in detail the creation, merchandising, and destruction of a professional anti-Communist who had a symbiotic relationship with the media and various branches of the government.\(^2\)

In February 1950, Cvetic made the first of several appearances before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). To the shock of his comrades and to the surprise of his non-Communist associates, Cvetic turned out to be an FBI informant who in 1943 had joined the Communist party (CP) in order to spy on it for the Bureau. The media made a hero out of Cvetic. The Cold War culture of the day resulted in a favorable response to Cvetic's tales about the Communist party in western Pennsylvania, the front organizations there, and his dual career as an FBI informant and a Red functionary. Cvetic's story has many aspects: those supplied by him and others to the media exaggerating his exploits and his sacrifices; those that the media for reasons of their own embellished; those set forth by Cvetic's critics; and those found in various government files released under the Freedom of Information Act.\(^3\) By looking at the various aspects of the Cvetic tale, it is possible to separate the man from the myth and, more important, to see how the several parties invented and then

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\(^3\) I requested material on Cvetic from the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in July 1988. A first batch of material was released to me in May 1989. Of the 415 pages reviewed by the Bureau, 267 were released, many with substantial deletions. A second batch was released in Sept. 1989, and a third in Feb. 1990: each time there were substantial deletions. Notwithstanding the disappointment occasioned by such deletions, I found the FBI reviewers (who I periodically telephoned) helpful, courteous, and concerned. But the guidelines they are required to follow have vitiated the FOIA during the past decade. Moreover, the FBI files need to be used with care, given the fact that much of what is available often is hearsay and designed to curry favor with the then FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Despite these caveats, as well as the time-consuming delays encountered in obtaining the FBI material and that found in the files of other government departments, the FOIA remains a very useful tool. Other government files are cited as used. The Cvetic FBI file is #100-372409 "Matthew Cvetic" (hereafter, FBI Cvetic).
used Cvetic’s anti-Communist image to advance their own competing, and sometimes contradictory, interests.

Communists had a small presence in Pennsylvania. Of the 10,498,012 people who lived in Pennsylvania in 1950, less than one-tenth of one percent formally belonged to the Communist party. According to J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, the CP in June 1950 could claim only 2,875 members in Pennsylvania. In his own mind, however, Hoover conjured up a larger number lurking in the shadows. He argued (and this argument helps explain both the rationale for McCarthyism and its impact) that “behind this force of traitorous Communists abound a half million fellow travellers and sympathizers ready to do the Communist bidding.” Under Hoover’s rigorous direction, the FBI in Pennsylvania, as elsewhere in the United States, closely tracked the activity of CP members and of individuals considered sympathetic to Communist causes. The FBI had undertaken such monitoring with various degrees of intensity since the formation of a Communist party in America after World War I. This monitoring included detailed scrutiny of all CP public functions and publications, as well as the use of electronic surveillance, surreptitious entries, and undercover operatives.4

During the late 1940s and the 1950s, FBI undercover operatives surfaced as needed to testify at trials or before congressional committees, especially HUAC with which the FBI ultimately cooperated. Hoover’s associates systematically briefed HUAC staff, made available supposedly restricted confidential information from the FBI’s voluminous files, and provided the committee with a flow of friendly witnesses whose testimony made headlines. According to historian Kenneth O’Reilly, these witnesses “were the lifeblood” of the committee. Not all HUAC witnesses were undercover operatives—some like Louis Budenz, the former editor of the Daily Worker, had defected from the Communist cause—but a significant number of “friendly”

witnesses during HUAC’s heyday were operatives the FBI had used over the years to infiltrate the Communist party. Matthew Cvetic was one of those operatives. He testified before HUAC for six days in February and March 1950. His testimony on what was called “the Communist presence in Western Pennsylvania” touched on various organizations that HUAC claimed the CP dominated. These organizations included the American Slav Congress and the Progressive party. Cvetic also spent considerable time testifying about what HUAC described as “Communist infiltration of labor unions.” His observations “focused particularly on Pittsburgh Local 601 of the United Electrical Workers [UE], long known as a Communist-controlled union” (to use the words of Walter Goodman, an evenhanded historian of HUAC’s activities).

During the 1950 hearings Cvetic named over 290 men and women either as party members or as individuals with strong Communist leanings. In addition to giving HUAC an unusually large number of names, Cvetic also detailed the allegedly “subversive” activities of various Communist leaders, including Steve Nelson, a veteran party

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5 Kenneth O'Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace* (Philadelphia, 1983), 230. The FBI also influenced other government agencies concerned with possible subversion. Carl Bernstein, for example, reports on a case being handled by a “loyalty review board” some of whose members “met secretly . . . with a personal emissary from Hoover”; this meeting was followed up by a “letter from the Director” stressing the fact that the anonymous informants in this case had (in the FBI head’s words) “personal knowledge of an established pattern of association.” And therefore should be believed. See Bernstein, *Loyalties*, 237-38.

functionary who took charge of its activities in western Pennsylvania during 1948. Cvetic became Nelson’s bête noire, appearing as a witness for the prosecution in the various trials that the CP leader had to endure in the early 1950s as a result of his Communist activities. Nelson later angrily dubbed Cvetic “Pittsburgh’s Number 1 informer.”

Others besides Cvetic had been informers, had mentioned many of the same names, had discussed Communist participation in various organizations, and had dwelt on the intricate and involved relationship between the UE and the Communists. Some of these witnesses in their testimony before HUAC had done so more knowledgeably and intelligently, but none had done so in such seeming detail. As Goodman later pointed out, HUAC “relied, heavily” on Cvetic’s lengthy testimony (and he was subsequently called back a number of times over the next years). The day Cvetic began testifying in executive session, HUAC “sources” told the press that when his “full story is told publicly it will literally smash the Communist Party in Western Pennsylvania.” Some months later, the committee reporting on its 1950 activities highlighted this “expose” of the CP and asserted that Cvetic’s testimony was “vitally important” in exposing the party’s “operations.”

Nelson, then as now, has dismissed Cvetic’s HUAC testimony as “just plain wild . . . nothing . . . other than giving names.” But the media, taking their cue from the committee, played up Cvetic’s role. The Pittsburgh newspapers, especially, made him a star and grossly inflated Cvetic’s party status. He was described as “one of Pittsburgh’s top Communists” and as a “close associate of Steve Nelson” (whose denials were ignored). These newspapers, like much of the media everywhere in the United States, emphasized the FBI’s employment of Cvetic as an “undercover agent”—an appellation that thoroughly angered Hoover, who always referred to Cvetic as a “confidential informant.” A few months after Cvetic testified, the then-influential

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and widely read *Saturday Evening Post* ran a three-part series of "as-told-to" articles in which Cvetic explained how "I Posed As A Communist For The FBI." In spring 1951 Warner Brothers released its highly exaggerated version of the Cvetic story, entitled *I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.* Some indication of the temper of the times can be gleaned from the fact that this crude, fanciful, highly propagandistic film got an Academy Award nomination for best documentary. That same year the Frederic W. Ziv Company, a successful syndicator of radio programs, signed up Cvetic for a series dramatizing his "undercover" activities.\(^9\)

Cvetic did not deserve the accolades lavished upon him in the early 1950s, including references as "a man of skill and intelligence," who had "demonstrated . . . courage and . . . patriotism." Still, Cvetic simply should not be dismissed as "a degenerate . . . barfly" and a "mercenary liar and sneak." Cvetic's defenders and detractors both missed the point. Cvetic's celebrity could not have been achieved without the anti-Communist hysteria then permeating American life. His testimony came only a few months after the nation's second largest labor organization, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, purged itself of various Communist-influenced unions (including its third largest affiliate, the UE, which had over 500,000 members); it took place just weeks after the conviction of Alger Hiss for perjury; and it followed only days after Senator Joseph McCarthy had burst onto the national scene with his conflicting statements about Communists working in the State Department.\(^10\)


Those who created Cvetetic-the-anti-Communist-hero discarded him once he outlived his usefulness. Whatever Cvetetic's self-perception, others saw him as a "schmuck," to use Monsignor Charles Owen Rice's pithy description. Rice, a militant and effective anti-Communist priest in Pittsburgh during the late 1940s, later maintained that Cvetetic "was perceived to be a schmuck by the people dealing with him" and consequently "was treated like one." Cvetetic, especially in his dealings with the FBI field office in Pittsburgh, proved at times to be fairly shrewd, but ultimately Monsignor Rice's judgment is correct. For Cvetetic, anti-Communism never really paid off.

Matthew Cvetetic's parents came to America at the turn of the century from a Slovenian village. The father managed to do fairly well and by 1942 owned various properties in the Pittsburgh area, including a building once used as a hotel and a service station. Matt Cvetetic was born in Pittsburgh in 1909. One of eleven children (six brothers and four sisters), he received a limited formal education. After graduating from a Roman Catholic grammar school, he spent two years at another parochial school and topped that off in the mid-1920s with a secretarial course at a local business school.

Thereafter for Cvetetic, jobs came and went in Pittsburgh. After a stint with a farm implements firm while still a teenager, he worked as a service manager with a furniture company and as a salesman with a radio company. During the mid-1930s, as Cvetetic later recalled, he ran a service station for his father and helped make a survey for the Department of Justice studying "10,000 case histories of present and past inmates of the Western Penitentiary." In 1937 he became a placement interviewer at a Pittsburgh branch of the U.S. Employment

11 Interview with Monsignor Rice, Aug. 16, 1988.
12 "I Wore a Red Mask for the FBI" by Matt Cvetetic as told to Pete Martin, "Rough Draft Long Version Before Checking with Lawyers," I Was a Communist for the F.B.I., pp. 84-85, Warner Brothers Archives (University of Southern California) (hereafter, WB USC). This draft reproduced the contents of thirteen dictaphone belts containing the conversations and interviews Post editor Pete Martin had with Cvetetic, which served as the basis for the three-part "as-told-to" series in that magazine: Martin to J.L. Warner, Aug. 9, 1950, Box I-45, WB USC. Cvetetic as told to Martin, Post, July 15, 1950, p. 94. HUAC Cvetetic, 1196. Special Agent in Charge, Pittsburgh (hereafter, SAC Pitts.) to Hoover, Feb. 26, 1942, FBI Cvetetic.
Service. Two years later he applied unsuccessfully for a position with U.S. Army Intelligence. He claimed, in addition to English, command of seven languages (Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, Lithuanian, Russian, Slovak, and Polish). Cvetic attributed his rejection by the army not to any shortcoming in his education or job experience but to "physical reasons." That well may have been so. The pudgy, admittedly "not athletic," Cvetic stood just 5'4" tall in his stocking feet.\(^{13}\)

Cvetic always maintained that his application to Army Intelligence had come to the attention of the FBI. The Bureau was interested in people who could serve as informants on Communist activities. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the United States sped up its own rearmament efforts. American Communists and their allies— influenced by the Soviet Union, which had signed a pact with Hitler's Germany in August 1939—impeded those efforts until Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. The FBI both before and after the Nazi invasion tried to infiltrate the Communist party in the United States. The Bureau recruited all kinds of people in different parts of the country.

In Pittsburgh Cvetic was but one of several informants taken on by the FBI. The Bureau there, according to the agent in charge of that office, was concerned about "Communists" at the employment service "who exert a tremendous influence over . . . policies and personnel." Cvetic recalled that two agents contacted him in April 1941, at a time when Communist-inspired strikes resulted in concern about delays in the national defense effort. He remembered that the agents asked him if he would keep "an eye open for Communists infiltrating our war plants" and that he quickly agreed to do so.\(^{14}\)

Patriotism might well have prompted Cvetic's decision to become an FBI informant. But Cvetic's brother Ben later recalled that "Matty always liked intrigue." Money played no role initially, for the agents who recruited Cvetic informed him that this assignment would be on

\(^{13}\) Cvetic as told to Martin, Post, July 15, 1950, p. 94; HUAC Cvetic, 1196; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Feb. 26, 1942, FBI Cvetic.

\(^{14}\) Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 15, 1950, p. 94; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Feb. 26, 1942 and Sept. 23, 1949, FBI Cvetic. The economist Walter Galenson is one of the various scholars who point to "the Communist policy of obstructing the national defense effort . . . prior to the German invasion of Russia in 1941." Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement (Cambridge, 1960), 185.
a "voluntary no-pay basis," but they also told him this situation would change if he managed to join the Communist party. Over the next months, Cvetic met several times with what he later called his "FBI advisers," while he (as one of them put it) "curried the Reds' favor." Cvetic attended meetings and rallies, bought books of Communist literature, assisted party members in finding certain kinds of jobs thanks to his position at the employment service, and spoke out vigorously in support of Communist causes at work and elsewhere. By February 1943, he had made clear to the Pittsburgh CP leadership that he "was good Commie material" and had achieved his goal of becoming a member of the Communist party.\(^\text{15}\)

Cvetic, as a member of the Communist party, continued to attend meetings, often two or three evenings a week, and he continued through the employment service to help Communists find jobs to which access otherwise would have been more difficult. He went to "Red propaganda movies," participated in classes at a "Marxist Leninist school," took an active part in CP membership recruitment drives, and helped organize and lead "education discussions" at the various Pittsburgh-area CP branches to which he belonged. He became active in "nationality work," joining Slovenian fraternal organizations, which he (and others) tried "to change into Party fronts." He picketed and marched on behalf of various Communist causes in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, held some minor official positions on various local CP committees, and worked for some months in 1946 and 1947 as a paid officer for the western Pennsylvania divisions of two Communist-dominated organizations. He also served diligently as a pipeline to the FBI.\(^\text{16}\)

Cvetic claimed that during the seven years he belonged to the party "the reports I made to the FBI totaled 20,000 typewritten pages" (or by my count approximately 59 pages a week). In addition, Cvetic declared that he had supplied the FBI with "30,000 pages of exhibits,\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Cvetic told HUAC when he surfaced that "I believe the best interests of the American people can be served by exposing Communism . . . so that the American people can understand it is a real menace": HUAC Cvetic, 1273. Ben Cvetic quoted in Jeffrey Zaslow, "When the Red Scare Hit Pittsburgh," _Pittsburgher Magazine_, March 1980, p. 63. SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Feb. 16, 1943, FBI Cvetic.

\(^{16}\) Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, _Post_, July 15, 1950, pp. 34, 35; July 29, 1950, p. 30; "I Wore a Red Mask," 63; HUAC Cvetic, 1196, 1200, 1208.
letters, press releases, pamphlets and other propaganda publications” and “reported the names of about 1,000 Communist Party members, the majority living in Western Pennsylvania but also . . . in Chicago, Cleveland, New York City, and Washington, D.C.” He also performed other tasks for the FBI, such as identifying individuals who had been surreptitiously filmed entering or leaving party meetings. The Bureau covered the more important meetings “like a blanket” (to use Cvetic’s words), and he attended screenings held at FBI offices where he identified whomever he could.17

The FBI no doubt considered Cvetic an extremely useful informant for much of his tenure with the Bureau. Various Special-Agents-in-Charge of the Bureau’s Pittsburgh office reported to Hoover on Cvetic’s “excellent results” and described him as “the most valuable source of information available . . . on general Communist activities, particularly in the foreign language field.” Hoover, after reviewing Cvetic’s record, declared as late as 1948: “I cannot emphasize too strongly the fact that Cvetic is at the present time the best possibility that the Bureau has to get into the inner circle of the Communist Party.” Over a year later, Hoover, notwithstanding problems caused by Cvetic’s dissatisfaction with his relationship with the Bureau, continued to emphasize the informant’s “inestimable value to the Bureau’s work.” And even after Cvetic surfaced, a Bureau appraisal lauded him as “one of the most productive informants we have had” despite the FBI’s dissatisfaction with his subsequent activities.18

In the years after he surfaced, Cvetic often referred to the perils he had faced because of his undercover work. He argued in his fanciful 1959 memoir that “exposure” would have meant “not only that my usefulness to the FBI would have ended, . . . but also the threat of savage Communist reprisal . . . brainwashing, torture or even death.” Melodramatically, Cvetic described one situation where it seemed his undercover status had been found out. He feared, as he phrased it, “I

18 SAC Pitts. to Hoover, June 7, 1943; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Oct. 15, 1945; Hoover to F.A. Fletcher, April 14, 1948; Hoover to SAC Pitts., Nov. 24, 1949; and T.A. Carlson to Clyde Tolson, Feb. 25, 1950, FBI Cvetic.
was in for a good going over by the Commie goon squad.” But in this instance, as in others, he worried unnecessarily. The history of Communism in the United States, as elsewhere in the world, has its share of mysterious “suicides,” unexplained disappearances, and political murders, but Cvetic discovered such dangers to himself only after he had become stale news, the public had lost interest in him, and most of the professional anti-Communists had discarded him. When Cvetic surfaced in 1950, however, “being tossed out of the Party” was the only risk he ever mentioned.19

After he surfaced, Cvetic also said that “one of the prices I had to pay for doing the work I did was having my family think me a jerk, maybe even a traitor.” He strongly implied that the demands made on him in maintaining a façade of a dedicated Communist disturbed his private life and that of his family. He suffered a 1946 divorce from his wife, Marie; prolonged separations from his twin sons, Matt, Jr., and Richard (born 1932), who were badgered in school by other children who resented the sons of an active Communist; and difficult relationships with his brothers and sisters, who made it clear he “wasn’t welcome in their homes.” Cvetic especially regretted that his mother died in ignorance of his FBI connection (a situation played up by the press, with tag lines such as “Mother died thinking he was a Com- mie”). Over and over again he recalled that just two weeks before her death in 1949 she was still “begging me to change my name so I wouldn’t humiliate the rest of the Cvetics.” He felt that “I couldn’t tell her about my real job,” because she “might have given me away without meaning to do so.”20

Cvetic later maintained that this undercover status also precluded him from finding any solace in his religion, because “if it had got

19 Matthew Cvetic, The Big Decision (n.p., 1959), 82, 126, 128; Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 23, 1950, p. 53. The media emphasized the dangers supposedly faced by Cvetic; typical was a Pittsburgh newspaper headline “You Might Lose Life FBI Warned Cvetic in Red Party Role,” Pittsburgh Press, April 12, 1953, in Newspaper Clipping Collection (Pennsylvania Room, The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh). All subsequent references from Pittsburgh newspapers regarding Cvetic came from the Carnegie Clipping Collection except where noted otherwise.

around that I was still a Catholic, my sincerity as a Communist would have been suspect." He remembered that his sons "ragged" him for missing Mass. He apparently did take the priest of a downtown Pittsburgh church into his confidence. Cvetic later recalled that this sympathetic priest granted him "a special dispensation to give up attending Mass and receiving the sacraments." Cvetic remembered that, even at his beloved mother's funeral, because Communist co-workers attended, he had to "keep up my act" and "kick about there being so much sanctimonious stuff." Two of his brothers wanted "to take me outside and beat my brains out but my father persuaded them not to." In another version of this story, Cvetic asserted that "my oldest brother, who was calmer, talked them out of it."  

This image of sacrifice and dedication—very much a part of his HUAC testimony, the initial media coverage, and his subsequent public appearances—had no more grounding in reality than did the perils Cvetic claimed he faced. Far from attacking him for being a Communist, the Cvetic family ridiculed him. A sister remembered "we all laughed at him." One son described him as "a weak husband" and "a weak father" whom he "never got to know . . . very well"—Cvetic "usually came in after midnight and I wouldn’t see him in the morning when I went to school."  

Even before becoming involved with the FBI, Cvetic had an uneasy domestic life. His marriage "was never a happy one," as he later carefully put it. Shortly after the wedding in 1929, he went to see doctors about what has been described as "a nervous condition" and during the mid-1930s Cvetic was "treated" by a Pittsburgh psychiatrist. Cvetic's ex-wife felt that "as a husband he was a total failure." In 1939 she had sued him for non-support and "monies owed"; the court entered a judgment against him but suspended it when Cvetic and his wife reconciled later that year. That same year he was arrested for assaulting his wife's sister during an argument "concerning monies loaned him by her." The sister-in-law suffered various injuries, includ-

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ing a broken right wrist; subsequently, she agreed to a *nol pros* of Cvetic's indictment after he agreed to "make restitution."

Cvetic's neglect of his sons, which he bemoaned as an unfortunate byproduct of his FBI work, may have had other causes. As a Pittsburgh newspaperman friendly to Cvetic put it, the latter had a "hard time" staying away from "booze and babes." Testimony taken during his wife's divorce action indicated that Cvetic "kept company with other women." Cvetic later admitted he "went with more than one girl." By all accounts, he liked women and chased them.

Nor did Cvetic keep his undercover work as deep a secret as he later publicly claimed. Monsignor Rice recalls Cvetic talking about this work with him and others—and not just priests like himself. Cvetic hinted strongly in unlikely public places about his ties to the FBI, even in "Paddy's horse room, a well-known downtown Pittsburgh betting parlor" frequented by many of the city's newspapermen. Cvetic later also admitted revealing "to more than one girl his . . . connection with the FBI." Early on he had disclosed his role as an informant to his eldest brother, his psychiatrist, and his wife. At the time she "wasn't inclined to believe" the story.

In 1947 the Bureau became aware of some of Cvetic's indiscretions as a result of his pursuit of a woman he later referred to as "Helen Newman." When Cvetic met her, she was a Stouffer's restaurant cashier in her late twenties. He hoped to marry her after his divorce. She lived with her family, and the father—on learning of Cvetic's

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24 Telephone interview with James Moore, Aug. 12, 1988; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Feb. 16, 1949, FBI Cvetic; "Description of Helen Newman as given by Matt Cvetic to Morris Ebenstein, Aug. 15, 1950," Box I-45, WB USC.

Communist affiliations—told him "we don't want any God-damned Communist in this house. . . . If I ever see you around here again I'll blow your head off." The woman's mother became so agitated about a Communist wooing her daughter that she "used to have fainting spells, fits, and attacks of blindness when Cvetic's name was mentioned." How serious was the relationship between Cvetic and the woman remains unclear. He fondly remembered giving her a cocker spaniel that they walked together. But she became engaged to another man. Cvetic then told the girl about his FBI ties, and she in turn told her parents. It made no difference; she remained affianced to the other man. Cvetic was anxious to have the story confirmed, and he requested that his Bureau contacts talk with the woman. Dismayed at this breach of security, the Pittsburgh FBI "forcefully advised" Cvetic that neither the girl nor her parents would be contacted. Hoover and the Pittsburgh office considered discontinuing Cvetic as a result of this indiscretion. But because his services were considered "extremely reliable" by the Pittsburgh office, Hoover decided to continue Cvetic as an informant.

It would also seem that the FBI payments Cvetic received weekly meant more than he ever publicly admitted. After joining the party in 1943, Cvetic received $15.00 a week from the FBI for his services. Cvetic also learned that "he may expect increases in the compensation . . . afforded him in accordance with the value of [his] information." Cvetic evidently gave value for the money, for by the end of 1943 the FBI paid him $35.00 weekly. The payments steadily increased, peaking in mid-1948 at $85.00 (a handsome weekly salary for the time—especially as he paid no tax on it). Cvetic never paid taxes on any of the cash he received from the FBI.
For a time, Cvetic also worked as a paid official for various front organizations. He always maintained that he became available for these jobs because his strongly anti-Communist supervisor at the employment service forced him out in December 1945. During 1946 Cvetic earned $60.00 a week from the FBI and $60.00 a week from the Communist-controlled American Committee for Yugoslav Relief. During the first half of 1947, he continued to double dip, supplementing his FBI earnings with a $65.00-a-week job at the American Slav Congress.28

Thereafter, until late 1948, except for short stints with front groups such as the Progressive party, Cvetic "faked a cover job." He lived off the FBI's weekly payments. From November 1948 until he surfaced in February 1950, Cvetic sold insurance on a commission basis to supplement these payments. He claimed to have sold many policies, especially to "my Communist friends," supposedly insuring Steve Nelson's automobile—a claim angrily denied by Nelson. Cvetic may have done well, but to the Pittsburgh FBI he constantly complained about being debt-ridden. Cvetic repeatedly demanded more money, so much so that the Pittsburgh FBI complained to Hoover about Cvetic's "insatiable desire for salary increases." In 1948 Cvetic demanded at least $100 a week and threatened to quit if he did not get such a raise. For much of 1949 he continued unsuccessfully to demand weekly payments of $100. During all Cvetic's years as an informant, the Bureau supplemented his weekly stipend by paying many of the expenses he incurred as a result of his anti-Communist activity (e.g., dues, subscriptions, travel expenses).29

For many of his undercover years Cvetic, under the pseudonym Robert Stanton, lived at the William Penn, the largest and one of the

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28 Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 22, 1950, p. 54; "I Wore a Red Mask," 76.
29 Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 29, 1950, p. 30; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Aug. 22, 1948; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, May 7, 1948, FBI Cvetic. Nelson to Leab, Sept. 20, 1990, p. 5. Among the expenses the FBI covered were assessments by the party and front organizations, telephone calls, and union expenditures. In addition, the Bureau reimbursed Cvetic for expenditures such as $99.77 laid out for taxi fares and "entertainment" while attending a 1945 front organization convention in Cleveland, or $123.45 for expenses involved with a New York City meeting of the National Committee of the American Slav Congress in 1947: SAC Pitts. to Hoover, May 29, 1944; April 7, 1945; Oct. 16, 28, 1947, FBI Cvetic.
finest hotels in Pittsburgh. After separating from his wife, he had moved to a furnished room but then decided on the hotel as it would facilitate his undercover work ("my FBI contacts could drop in . . . with less chance of being noticed"). Cvetic maintained he made a deal with the William Penn management to pay for the room on a monthly basis, which kept the cost to where he could afford it. Steve Nelson has charged that Cvetic lived there "gratis" in return for "stooling" on the affairs of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. There may be some validity to this charge, for Cvetic later claimed that his "sworn testimony" about Communists in the Pittsburgh local of this union had resulted in its members voting to give "the Reds . . . the old heave-ho." Whatever the basis for Cvetic's stay at the William Penn, his living there evidences the fact that for him undercover work resulted in an improved, handsome style of living.30

The rapidly changing public attitude towards Communism after World War II threatened that style of living. Cvetic joined the party in 1943 at the height of the war, when, in Pittsburgh as elsewhere in the country, Red baiting virtually ceased. Communists were an integral part of the war effort, and the Soviet Union was a "valiant" ally. After 1945, as the Soviet Union became "the enemy" and as the Cold War intensified, so too did a renewed campaign against Communism in the United States. In heavily Catholic Pittsburgh the repression of the church in eastern Europe by Soviet-initiated Communist regimes engendered an especially emotional response. Anxiety soon turned into overt hostility as American Catholic leaders in defense of their religion denounced "Christ-hating Communists[,] . . . men who as their God know only Satan and Stalin." Communists, those suspected of being Communists, or those judged to be following the party line faced social ostracism, loss of employment, and economic discrimination (such as denial of jobs). It was then that Cvetic, because of his Communist ties, began to face the problems with family, friends, and employers and fellow workers that were so played up by the media in 1950. Cvetic

30 Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 15, 1950, p. 92; Nelson, The 13th Juror, 237; Cvetic, The Big Decision, 68. David Caute points out that among the men Cvetic "fingered" were two Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union leaders in Pittsburgh, who, given the option to deny his charges or to resign, chose to resign: Caute, The Great Fear, 217. Cvetic's pseudonym came from the address of his parents, who lived on Stanton Avenue.
also faced real physical dangers, but not from his “comrades.” Mob violence began to engulf Communist meetings. In spring 1949, for example, a demonstration in Pittsburgh against a Communist rally got out of hand and became what Nelson characterized as “a concentrated attack” on those who attended. Cvetic, who had helped organize the rally, later recalled “we were hit by pop bottles, our clothes fouled by spittle, and we were shoved around.”

Cvetic suddenly found himself in an unexpected dilemma. His Communist links, while still lucrative per se because of his undercover work, were causing him emotional distress. Cvetic could not cope with the situation. Never the most stable of individuals, Cvetic had been categorized by the FBI bureaucracy as “moody . . . subject to alternating periods of enthusiasm, self-pity, and depression.” A Pittsburgh FBI agent pegged Cvetic as a “neurotic personality.” Cvetic by 1947 wanted to cut and run, to extricate himself from what he termed his “double life.” But the FBI refused to disclose the job “I'd been doing and thereby re-establish me as a loyal citizen.” Notwithstanding recommendations made by Pittsburgh and Washington FBI officials, Hoover decided that, as in all such cases, “no press releases of any kind will be made by the Bureau regarding him.” Hoover further determined that, if Cvetic attempted to capitalize on his FBI ties, the Bureau should make “no comment” and so instructed the Pittsburgh office.

Always fond of the bottle, Cvetic began to drink too much. He may have been “under the influence” when he disclosed his ties to “Helen Newman.” In any event, one morning in the latter part of 1948, after a night out, he regained consciousness in the city jail and later maintained that “someone slipped me a Mickey Finn.” Both the FBI

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32 SAC Pitts, to D.M. Ladd, Jan. 2, 26, 1949; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Aug. 22, 1949, FBI Cvetic; Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 29, 1950, p. 99. Caute asserts that Pittsburgh was “the violent epicenter of the anti-Communist eruption in postwar America”: Caute, The Great Fear, 216.

32 SAC Pitts. to D.M. Ladd, Jan. 2, 26, 1949; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Aug. 22, 1949, FBI Cvetic; Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 29, 1950, p. 100; Hoover to SAC Pitts., Nov. 1, 1949, FBI Cvetic.
and the Communist party found him less and less useful and they dumped him.  

Despite all his much-vaunted involvement with the Communist party, Cvetic never had become as he claimed (and as the media maintained) Nelson's "lieutenant and right-hand man." On the contrary, Cvetic never rose above the party's lower echelons. A detailed 1949 HUAC report about the American Slav Congress, for example, mentions various persons many times but refers to Cvetic only in passing as "a Slovenian Communist Party member." In 1950, after Cvetic surfaced, the CP leadership claimed to have been onto him. In any event, his erratic behavior must have eroded whatever confidence that leadership ever had in Cvetic. As Cvetic declared in 1950, he "was merely doing odd jobs for the Party."  

At the same time, his reports to the FBI, as Cvetic himself later recognized, increasingly became "just plain sloppy." The Bureau had considered discontinuing Cvetic as an informant in 1947, when it learned that he had discussed his FBI ties with "Helen Newman" and his eldest brother. The decision to retain him had been made in part because of his value as a source and in part because of a belief in his future potential as a pipeline into Communist party activities nationally. But the Pittsburgh FBI found it difficult to deal with Cvetic's incessant salary demands and erratic behavior. And his future potential looked dubious because of his unwillingness to leave Pittsburgh. Hoover felt that Cvetic was "procrastinating." The Pittsburgh FBI agents believed that the prospect of moving to New York City "did not appeal to him." Cvetic later recalled that his interest no longer lay in continuing as an informant but in getting out.  

Cvetic actually stood a good chance of being booted out. Further indiscretions by him about his FBI ties had come to the attention of the Pittsburgh Bureau. In looking for a job he had discussed his FBI ties with a steel company executive. In December 1948, the concerned

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35 Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 29, 1950, p. 100; Hoover to SAC Pitts., May 7, 1948; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, March 8, 1948, FBI Cvetic.
head of the Pittsburgh FBI recommended to Hoover the “immediate discontinuance” of Cvetic. Hoover’s staff agreed with this recommendation but urged a delay in its implementation in order to “get back some of our investment” in Cvetic. To “get as much out of him as we can,” they advocated the use of Cvetic as a government witness in the Smith Act prosecutions of the Communist party national leadership, a marathon trial in New York City that lasted from January to October 1949. Hoover accepted this suggestion. Cvetic, delighted that his FBI ties would become public under such favorable circumstances, agreed to testify, provided the government made clear that he was “an undercover agent” and not a “stool pigeon who . . . sold out.” The prosecution agreed. The FBI made Cvetic available to the government’s attorneys. He made a favorable impression. A U.S. attorney declared Cvetic “would make a good government witness.” At the last moment, Cvetic learned that the government did not need his testimony. “That decision was a bitter disappointment” recalled Cvetic, who “felt as if somebody had kicked me in the belly.”

Cvetic claimed that from then on he increasingly “kept at the FBI” to acknowledge publicly his undercover work and to help him find another government job. He still felt comfortable with the FBI, remaining “unaware of his . . . status with the Bureau” (to use one agent’s words). The Pittsburgh FBI wanted to discontinue Cvetic as soon as possible. Hoover concurred. The delay in firing Cvetic resulted not from any consideration for him but a fear on every level of the FBI privy to the situation that “he might be the source of some embarrassment to the Bureau.” Some on Hoover’s staff suggested sending Cvetic to work for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), on the assumption that if used as a witness by that government agency “it can be pointed out to Cvetic that his services are no longer available in view of his public disclosure and he can be told further payments cannot be made to him.” The idea of becoming what one FBI bureaucrat described as “a professional witness” for the INS

36 SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Dec. 23, 1948; SAC Pitts. to D.M. Ladd, Jan. 4, 26, 1949; Hoover to Tolson, no date (probably early Jan. 1949); Hoover to SACs NYC and Pitts., Jan. 26, 1949; SAC NYC to Hoover, Feb. 15, 1949; Hoover to SAC Pitts., June 8, 1949; SAC NYC to Hoover, no date (probably May 1949), FBI Cvetic; Cvetic as told to Pete Martin, Post, July 29, 1950, p. 100; “I Wore a Red Mask,” 18, 80.
appealed to Cvetic, but it came to naught as his circumstances changed.\textsuperscript{37}

In December 1949, Pittsburgh FBI personnel learned that Cvetic again had disclosed his FBI ties to various persons. The FBI fired Cvetic as of January 3, 1950, but paid him through January 23. That day the Pittsburgh FBI advised Cvetic “no further contacts . . . would be sought.” Cvetic accepted his dismissal evenhandedly and told the agents he did not “hold any ill will towards the FBI.” Previously, when faced with terminating his association with the FBI and losing his main source of income, Cvetic had been much more emotional. He had blustered, carried on nervously, and given way to “weeping.” His equanimity this time stemmed from the fact that the Pittsburgh individuals with whom he discussed his FBI ties proposed to help him capitalize on them politically and financially. In time, they too would turn on Cvetic, but initially they provided a lifeline.\textsuperscript{38}

Cvetic had found a transition from the FBI thanks to his acquaintanceship with James Moore, a well-connected, gregarious, clever Pittsburgh newspaperman. A graduate of Franklin and Marshall College in the early 1930s, Moore had been active in the Pittsburgh chapter of the American Newspaper Guild. He had served with the Flying Tigers in China during World War II. Returning to Pittsburgh at war’s end, he found employment with the Hearst chain’s \textit{Sun-Telegraph} and covered the City Hall beat. During the mid-1940s he met Cvetic at Paddy’s horse room. Cvetic, using the pseudonym Bob Stanton, spun Moore what the newsman spotted as a “phoney tale.” The somewhat inebriated Cvetic, caught out, invited the newsman to the William Penn and over drinks explained his Communist ties and FBI connection. Cvetic stayed in touch with Moore. During the summer of 1949, Cvetic, concerned about his deteriorating relationship with the FBI, approached Moore about capitalizing on his Bureau activities. He asked Moore to peddle the story of a man who worked undercover for the FBI—a hot subject at the time because of the FBI undercover


\textsuperscript{38} SAC Pitts. to D.M. Ladd, Dec. 28, 1949; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Jan. 4, 1950; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Sept. 23, 1949; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Jan. 4, 1950, FBI Cvetic.
opers attend the initial Smith Act prosecution of the top Communist party leadership. Moore claims to have had no inkling of the FBI's real attitude toward Cvetic.\(^{39}\)

Moore found that his newspaper "didn't want to own Cvetic," but he did a fine job in selling the story. First, the newsman put Cvetic in touch with Blair F. Gunther and Harry Alan Sherman, who spearheaded the anti-Communist crusade in Pittsburgh. They had helped organize and lead Americans Battling Communism (ABC), a local group whose membership included some of Pittsburgh's most prominent citizens. The outspokenly anti-Communist ABC was set up during the late 1940s. The ABC has been described as "an instrument of political repression" and "a vigilante group." Gunther and his associates would have objected to such terms, but saw nothing wrong in hounding Communists.\(^{40}\)

The vehemently patriotic Gunther was a tough county court judge and a shrewd politician. After his death in 1966, the *New York Times* acknowledged him to have been "for many years one of the most powerful men in Pennsylvania's Republican Party." Although partly of German ancestry, he emphasized his Polish background and was (as a friendly newspaper profile put it) "something of a professional Pole." He had served as president of the Polish National Alliance and helped organize the American Slav Congress but quit it in the mid-1940s because "the Commies were taking over." Very conservative politically, he later supported a proposed constitutional amendment repealing the federal income tax and worked hard to achieve the nomination of Barry Goldwater as the 1964 Republican presidential candidate. Sherman—a prominent litigator, sole practitioner, and former Assistant District Attorney—was an aggressive hard worker whose specialties included labor relations law. He had fought strenuously and effectively against labor racketeering. He campaigned equally fiercely against what he perceived as "the Communist threat" to labor organizations and moved actively against those UE locals that he described as "a labor front for the activities of the Communist Party." Anti-Communism permeated many aspects of this politically conservative lawyer's life. Sherman, active in the Jewish community, felt that


many Pittsburgh Communists paid lip service to religious tolerance but were "privately . . . very anti-Semitic."41

The efforts of Gunther, Sherman, and Moore brought Cvetic to the attention of HUAC's staff. When the committee proved anxious to hear Cvetic, ABC provided "$200 in expense money" for travel to Washington. On February 19, a few days before Cvetic's first HUAC appearance, his story ran in the Pittsburgh newspapers. The story broke as Cvetic and his associates wanted it heard and as befit the Cold War editorial inclinations of those newspapers. A few days earlier, Gunther had sworn Cvetic in and in a private hearing had taken his testimony about Communism and Communists in Pittsburgh. The city's newspapers played up this testimony in detail from every possible anti-Communist angle. Cvetic attracted national coverage. That attention intensified after Cvetic, on Tuesday, February 21, began his testimony before HUAC.42

Before that testimony finished, Cvetic had signed an agreement with Sherman and Moore allotting each of them 30 percent of the "net proceeds" of any undertaking that resulted from the promotion or sale of "the Cvetic story." Sherman as "attorney-agent" and Moore as "author-editor" in return promised, among other things, "to the best" of their abilities to promote "the Cvetic story." And this they did. Sherman, who appeared with Cvetic before HUAC as his counsel, later claimed, without exaggeration, that he "sponsored," "tutored," and "trained" the former undercover informant. During the weeks

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following the HUAC testimony, Sherman and Moore took advantage of the enormous favorable national press coverage that Cvetic had garnered. They pursued various deals including one with the Saturday Evening Post. Moore knew William Thornton “Pete” Martin—a productive, lively, competent Post associate editor known for his frequent “Pete Martin visits” and “as-told-to” celebrity articles. Moore apparently clinched the deal with the Post by sending Martin a scrapbook of Cvetic’s press clippings. On March 20, 1950, Cvetic as well as Sherman and Moore signed a contract with the Saturday Evening Post,
which bought the rights to "the story" for $5,000 (only $1,000 of which was paid on signing). 43

This first installment of the Post's three-part series relating Cvetic's story "as told to Pete Martin" appeared in mid-July 1950. "I Posed As A Communist For The FBI" presented a self-sacrificing, patriotically motivated Cvetic different from the informant known to his Bureau contacts. Cvetic later admitted that at best the articles were "substantially true." If in substance the articles hewed to reality, in detail they moved a ways from events inconvenient to the Cvetic myth and ignored such aspects as his drinking or dismissal by the FBI. The Post series emphasized those aspects of Cvetic's career that matched the ugly picture of Communism in America drawn in the latter 1940s by defectors, informers, and undercover operatives who had surfaced. This picture, disseminated by a media blitz, presented Communism in the United States as "a secret conspiratorial movement in the interests of a foreign power" (i.e., the Soviet Union). 44

Movie companies, including Warner Brothers, had expressed an interest in Cvetic's story even before the Post articles appeared. In August 1950, Warner Brothers bought the rights to Cvetic's story as set forth in the Post for $12,500. The studio agreed to pay $3,125 on execution of the contract, $3,125 on November 5, 1950, and $6,250 on March 5, 1951. Cvetic certainly seemed to have recovered from the economic problems he had faced a few months earlier. But in the end, he did not fare well financially. Even in 1950 terms, Warner laid out little for the rights: consider the $75,000 paid the Soviet defector Igor Gouzenko by Twentieth Century-Fox for the rights to his story. 45


And, as with the *Post* series, Cvetic had to share the money Warner paid, and not just with Sherman and Moore. The *Post* contract had required that Martin receive 15 percent of whatever the film rights brought. Nor did Cvetic enjoy fringe benefits such as Martin wrangled from the studio. Warner engaged the *Post* editor for two weeks as a "consultant and advisor" on the Cvetic project, paying Martin $500 weekly, plus $200 in living expenses as well as the cost of travel back and forth across the country. The studio also assured Martin that while in California "you will have a reasonable amount of time to carry out your regular . . . *Post* interviewing assignments."46

These contracts reinforce the conclusion that Cvetic was indeed a "schmuck" and treated like one. Yet that conclusion should not detract from the fact that much of his 1950 HUAC testimony (whether coached or not) had its basis in reality, especially as regards identifying past and present party members. As Nelson has pointed out, Cvetic "named names already publicly known" in 1950. The venue and the times were the cause of so much anguish to people. The Pittsburgh papers, for example, published a little paragraph on each of the people named by Cvetic before HUAC in 1950. However reprehensible "naming names" is viewed, Cvetic in 1950 hewed fairly closely to the truth, although the Pittsburgh FBI later found that some information he supplied to HUAC "cannot be found in the files of this office." Such information became more frequent in Cvetic’s subsequent career as a "kept witness." Cvetic shortly became one of a group that Richard Rovere justly excoriated for making a "business of being witnesses" and thereby "fooling American due process."47

However much of Cvetic’s 1950 testimony on Communists in western Pennsylvania may have been grounded in fact, the personal story of sacrifice and dedication within which he placed that testimony was in essence a fabrication. Yet, that fabrication—accepted and inflated by a Red-baiting media in a time of growing national paranoia about "the Red menace"—grew to have a life of its own. The *Post* articles built on the fabrication in Cvetic's HUAC testimony and exaggerated


them. Warner Brothers, in turn, further distorted Cvetic’s activities and life with the addition of melodramatic fictions designed to make its production more commercial. This distortion did not become evident initially, even though once Warner Brothers became involved its publicity machine went to work. A plethora of stories appeared announcing the studio’s intent to make a “quality” film. Studio press releases described the project as “a film in the traditions of Confessions of a Nazi Spy,” a serious, well-received 1939 Warner production that was among Hollywood’s earliest overtly anti-Nazi films. Jack Warner, the studio’s head of production (or his public relations “ghost”), grandly declared “it is my hope that with this picture Warner Brothers will be able to halt the march of those who are trying to undermine the foundations of our democratic structure,” and asserted that Cvetic deserved “a decoration for civilian heroism.”

Even in an industry given to hyperbole, Jack Warner obviously exaggerated. But, like the production executives at other Hollywood studios, he sought a genre that would halt the erosion of the movie-going audience. That audience reached a peak in 1946, but it declined from 1947, “long before most American cities had television,” and television only hastened the decline. Various factors played a role in declining movie attendance, including changing demographics (the postwar move to the suburbs, which removed the potential audience from the downtown theatres) and increasing competition for the average American’s “leisure dollar.” The economic problems arising from the declining audience were further compounded by the implementation of the “Consent Decree,” which forced the studios to choose between production and exhibition. The forced sale of their theatres subsequently reduced the profitability of the studios: the Warner theatres, for example, before being sold, had earned 62 percent of that corporation’s profits. The studios sought a new genre in order to recapture the movie audience, and this resulted in a stream of socially conscious movies. The studios also thought to make use of their old formulas in a more up-to-date fashion. Thus anti-Communism replaced

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anti-fascism, which change the studios hoped would placate the witch hunters, but I Was a Communist for the F.B.I. was an investment more than a political sop. It was conceived and filmed well after the 1947 HUAC hearing on the industry and months before a new series of investigations by HUAC. Warner Brothers sought to use the old formulas, updated to the Cold War, but failed to understand the changes that had taken place in the audience.49

Notwithstanding the studio's stated commitment to "quality," when in August 1950 Warner Brothers announced purchase of "the Cvetic story," the choice of production personnel indicated otherwise. The producer, Bryan Foy, had a reputation stretching back into the 1920s for churning out melodramas cheaply and quickly. He had gained renown at various studios, in one critic's words, "for endlessly reusing the same story in different guises." Foy proudly recalled having done so five times with one plot, the settings ranging from a circus to the Northwest woods. Known for his "loyalty to old friends," Foy tapped one of them, Crane Wilbur, initially to fashion Cvetic's story for the screen. Wilbur's career as an actor, director, and writer began in the theatre before World War I. As a writer, melodrama was his forte, but not always successfully. Wilbur ventured to Hollywood in the 1930s as a writer and director and worked mostly on "B" film melodramas.50

When Wilbur left the Cvetic project for a time, he was succeeded by Bordon Chase. Chase had pronounced conservative political views, but he was assigned to the Cvetic story because of his availability and record of action-oriented screenplays. Born Frank Fowler in Brooklyn, Chase after several careers had come to Hollywood in the 1940s and

worked at various studios. His output included "B" programmers as well as *Red River*, a 1948 western (described as "a classic of the genre"), which earned him an Academy Award nomination. The director of the *Cvetic* film, Gordon Douglas, in the words of one writer, held "no illusions about himself." He told an interviewer: "I guess some people would say I was a whore . . . but I would rather work." Described by critic Andrew Sarris as an "efficient technician," the forty-one-year-old Douglas for over a decade had without particular distinction directed comedies, mysteries, and swashbucklers, as well as one of the first anti-Communist movies, *Walk a Crooked Mile* (a 1948 release in which the FBI and Scotland Yard team up to catch a gang of Communist spies). The *Cvetic* film was just another assignment to Douglas.51

At one point Kirk Douglas and Ruth Roman, then rising stars, were considered for the roles of *Cvetic* and his romantic interest. Ultimately, for the role as *Cvetic*, the studio cast Frank Lovejoy, a former radio actor who was a solid but undistinguished contract player used for leads in films such as this and in supporting roles in more important features. The part of the girl went to Dorothy Hart, an undistinguished contract player. James Millican, "a utility actor, in numerous action films," played the Nelson character. Warner contract actors Philip Carey and Richard Webb, both of whom later carved out careers on television (the latter as "Captain Midnight"), played *Cvetic*'s FBI contacts.52

Wilbur finished his treatment in September 1950, before moving on to another project. His version of *Cvetic*'s story added a "sincere" romance as well as gangster film elements such as two CP-ordered murders disguised as suicides. Wilbur did follow closely some of the

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details Cvetic had related to Pete Martin—as can be seen from the marked passages in the Post editor’s 102-page transcript of his conversations with Cvetic (not all of which appeared in the articles) that found their way into Wilbur’s 46-page treatment. Wilbur parroted Cvetic’s fabrications about his CP activities, his sacrifices, his problems with his family, his fears about exposure and retribution, and his views on Nelson and other CP leaders.53

Chase began his efforts in October 1950. A hard worker and a speedy writer, he had by December 9, 1950, turned in another treatment as well as two scripts and some “revised pages.” He then moved on to another assignment. Chase made little use of Martin’s transcript of his conversations with Cvetic or of the Wilbur treatment. All the versions written by Chase reeked of simple-minded anti-Communism, melodramatic coincidence, and “B” gangster film conventions. Indeed, someone at Warner who read Chase’s first effort wrote on its cover the admonition “tell as 92nd St.” This note referred to a well-received 1945 Twentieth Century-Fox film, The House on 92nd Street, which in straightforward, documentary-like fashion detailed the FBI roundup of a gang of Nazi spies. None of Chase’s versions had any of that film’s restraint.54

The problem of delineating the Steve Nelson character epitomizes the script problems faced by Chase and the studio. Foy and others at Warner could not decide on just how to portray Nelson. He always remained a threat to Cvetic. In one draft Nelson clearly gives the orders—be it for espionage, murder, or merely cutting off a long-winded speaker at an American Slav Congress meeting. In another draft Nelson, now called Beldon, became a senior underling fearful of his superiors in New York City and Moscow—so much so that Cvetic could successfully parry the Nelson character by warning “Knock me off and you’ll be the next to go.”55

The continuing script problems resulted in a lessening of studio interest and the elimination of scenes that might cost more to film.

53 Crane Wilbur, “Outline for ‘I Posed as a Communist for the FBI,’ ” WB USC.
55 Chase, “Treatment for ‘I Posed as a Communist for the FBI,’ ” Nov. 25, 1950, pp. 12, 24, 112; Dec. 9, 1950, p. 108, WB USC.
All the versions scripted by Chase drew on the contemporary American media’s Red-baiting view of domestic and international Communism and glorified Cvetic and the FBI. Before Chase moved on, the studio determined to change the film’s title. “I Posed As A Communist For The FBI” (the title of the Cvetic-Martin Post articles) became I Was a Communist for the F.B.I. Such a change in title was not unusual in Hollywood, where all the studios tried to market their product as best they could. But in this instance the change also reflected Warner Brothers’ serious problems in coming to grips with Cvetic’s story as presented in the Saturday Evening Post.56

Wilbur, having finished his other chores for the studio, returned to the project during the second week of December 1950. The incomplete script Wilbur turned in just before Christmas found little favor with studio executives. The script had little to do with his previous efforts or Chase’s various versions. On the penultimate day of the year Wilbur turned in the first part of yet another revised script blending his earlier efforts with Chase’s versions and adding some new touches. This script anxious studio executives determined to film, even though Wilbur essentially had produced a “B” melodrama with some limited and very unsophisticated Red-baiting ideological overtones.57

Production began on January 6, 1951. By that date Wilbur had completed about 45 percent of the script. While production rolled on, he finished the screenplay. At the same time responding to suggestions from Foy and Douglas, he revised pages of script turned in earlier, often just a few days. The revisions further cheapened the ideological content and heightened the melodrama. Wilbur completed the bulk of his work by February 5, but principal photography continued until February 21. The film’s original schedule had called for twenty-four days of shooting, but it needed an additional sixteen days despite Douglas’s use of Saturdays and evenings.58

56 J.L. Warner to All Department Heads, Nov. 11, 1950, WB USC. Jack Warner reported on the change and expressed certainty that it “will help in selling the picture”: Warner to Martin, Dec. 11, 1950, WB USC.
57 Wilbur, “I Was a Communist for the FBI,” Dec. 22, 1950 (script), WB USC.
58 Wilbur, “I Was a Communist for the FBI,” Jan. 13, 1951, pp. 53-74 (script); three revised pages, Jan. 20, 1951, pp. 75-83 (script); Jan. 27, 1951, pp. 86-108 (script); six revised pages, Feb. 5, 1951, pp. 108A-121 (script); twenty revised pages, “Daily Production and Progress Sheets,” I Was a Communist for the F.B.I., WB USC.
In Hollywood, studios often tinker with their films after the completion of principal photography to make them "better box-office." _I Was a Communist for the F.B.I._ was no exception. Studio executives, unsure of how to present the Cvetic story attractively on screen, tried to fine-tune the film. They got little assistance from Cvetic, ostensibly a "technical advisor." According to FBI reports, he exploited his newfound celebrity with one-night lecture stands, appearing at local Kiwanis and Lions Clubs as well as American Legion posts, between severe alcoholic binges (one of which landed him in a Pittsburgh jail). To the surprise and dismay of Warner Brothers personnel, the FBI—usually among the most cooperative government agencies—made it clear that as regards Cvetic and the movie "it was too late to give any advice"; the filmmakers "could do what they wished." Indeed, Hoover's office sent a memo to all local FBI branches announcing that "the Bureau did not approve this picture" and instructing all agency personnel to respond to inquiries about the film with the statement that the FBI "had absolutely nothing to do with its production." The lack of FBI cooperation was felt at every level: a Pittsburgh public relations man for Warner Brothers recalled years later how inexplicable it seemed to him at the time that he "couldn't get any assistance from the usually cooperative local FBI agents."

The studio's tinkering continued almost to the world premiere, which took place in Pittsburgh on April 19, 1951. Three weeks earlier Warner Brothers reshot one of the final scenes between Cvetic and his son. On April 14, just hours before release, prints were to be shipped across the country, and the studio hurriedly arranged for the processing laboratory to cut some twenty-two feet from these prints. As a result of "bad reactions" at press reviews, the studio cut the following lines spoken by Cvetic about the Soviet Union: "Their state capitalism is a Fascist horror far worse than anything Hitler ever intended for the world. That great liar of all times spoke the truth when he warned that to the East there was an enemy even more dangerous than he." Such absurdities dominated the shooting script.

that Wilbur had cobbled together from his own earlier efforts and those of Chase.60

The studio did not film all Wilbur's Red-baiting flights of fancy. Eliminated from production, for example, was part of a scene during which one of a team of party goons assigned to work Cvetic over shouts at him "our system makes Murder Incorporated look like an amateur set-up." But a great many Cold War clichés found their way into the finished film. Cvetic on screen sermonizes directly at the audience during his HUAC testimony in words that went far beyond anything said by him during his 1950 appearances before that congressional committee: the American Communist party, the film Cvetic warns, "is actually a vast spy system founded in this country by the Soviet, and composed of American traitors whose only purpose is to deliver the people of the United States into the hands of Russia as a colony of slaves." The Nelson character, now called James Blandon, informs his associates that "sometimes a Communist must turn his coat for the good of the cause. Didn't Comrade Stalin join with Hitler in '39?" At a reception for a visiting party dignitary, the Pittsburgh CP leadership all toast Stalin.61

*I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.* bore the usual disclaimer buried in small type at the end of the credits that "the story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons living or dead is intended or should be inferred." But all the publicity, including the trailer, promised the "FACT-FILLED REVELATIONS," the "WHOLE FEARLESS STORY," the "BLAZING AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNDERCOVER AGENT," the "FIRST STORY OF YOUR F.B.I.'S RELENTLESS COUNTER-ATTACK!"62

The film played up many of the media's exaggerations about Cvetic. He faces ostracism ("Hey, stay away from my kid, he doesn't need your help. Baseball's an American game."). His family is hostile ("You

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60 "Daily Production and Progress Sheets," H.J. McCord to J.H. Sporay (Ace Film Labs, Brooklyn, NY), April 14, 1951, WB USC.

61 Wilbur, "I Was a Communist for the FBI," Jan. 27, 1951, p. 100; Feb. 7, 1951, p. 119; and Dec. 30, 1951, p. 16, WB USC. The script is cited here, but I also have drawn here and in following statements from a videotape of the film as broadcast on television (hereafter, "Communist" video).

62 Quotations taken from the "dialogue transcript" for the trailer, WB USC.
The FBI needs him: it obtains Blandon's plans to cripple Pittsburgh industry, "thanks to Matt Cvetic." His excellent work for the party earns him an appointment as "chief-organizer . . . for Pittsburgh." Cvetic praises God for being allowed to testify before HUAC and to "crawl out of my rat hole and live like a man again."\(^{63}\)

The film also added various embellishments to Cvetic's story and to the American CP's history that he later incorporated into his version of undercover life. Warner Brothers gave him a "sincere" romantic interest, a school teacher who realizes she has been duped and in the approved fashion of the day declares she will name names. Blandon, in gangster fashion, orders her liquidation. An FBI agent sent to protect her is murdered, but Cvetic saves her through a shoot-out with the Communist goons. In a very powerful well-filmed sequence, CP thugs imported by Blandon use lead pipes wrapped in Yiddish newspapers to beat and silence union officers (including Cvetic's brother) trying to end a CP-induced wildcat strike at a Pittsburgh mill. The newspapers are part of the Communist plan to foment religious strife in the United States, just as the CP is shown to inflame racial tensions. An FBI agent in the film, referring to deaths in the 1943 race riots in Detroit and Harlem, explains "those poor fellows never knew their death warrants had been signed in Moscow."\(^{64}\)

The Warner Brothers production received uneven reviews. Anti-Communism seems to have motivated the more favorable. The *Motion Picture Herald*, an important trade journal whose militantly anti-Communist editor had gushed over Cvetic, judged the film a "major advance in the screen's fight against Communism." The influential Hearst gossip columnist Louella Parsons reviewed the film for the adamantly anti-Red publisher's wire service and called the production "not just another film" but the "strongest exposé of dread Communism to date." The Hearst *Sun-Telegraph* in Pittsburgh also reviewed the

\(^{63}\) "Communist" video. See also Wilbur, "I Was a Communist for the FBI," Dec. 30, 1950, pp. 33-34, 11-12, 20, 40; Jan. 17, 1951, p. 108 (script), WB USC.

\(^{64}\) "Communist" video. See also Wilbur, "I Was a Communist for the FBI," Jan. 20, 1951, p. 78 (script); Dec. 30, 1950, p. 24 (script), WB USC. Cvetic, *The Big Decision*, 111 (murder of a defecting writer), 124 (leadership), and 156 ("third degree grillings by Party goons").
film enthusiastically. Surprisingly, the rest of that city’s press expressed reservations, although lauding Cvetic. The media centered in New York City responded skeptically to the film, finding it, as one writer observed, “none other than the old gangster . . . formula.” Even vociferously anti-Communist *Time* found the film “crude, oversimplified, mechanical.” The *Christian Science Monitor* gave the film “a very bad critique.” This review as well as others across the country expressed concern about the film’s inability (in the words of John McCarten) “to have it clear . . . that there’s a hell of a difference between liberals and Stalin’s little helpers.”

Studio executives may have foreseen the more critical reviews, for Warner Brothers had geared up a publicity campaign that anticipated much of the negative response. Warner Brothers did not tout the Cvetic film as one of the studio’s “big pictures” of the year but worked hard to sell it. Some months later Jack Warner asserted the effort had paid off, as the film “had chalked up a highly successful box office record.” He did hedge with regard to exact figures, but whatever the final tally (and one estimate has the film grossing double its production costs), Cvetic certainly benefited from the studio’s intensive exploitation campaign.

With this campaign, Warner contributed mightily to the furthering of Cvetic’s image as a fearless, self-sacrificing folk hero knowledgeably fighting the Red menace. To cite just one notable example: *Newsweek*’s movie review found *I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.* implausible, but thanks to the studio’s efforts, the magazine used stills from the film (with suitably patriotic captions) in a widely distributed pamphlet designed to boost circulation. This pamphlet called attention to *Newsweek*’s ongoing uncompromising “exposé of Communism” and equated it to the “authentic story . . . you will see in an exciting . . . timely

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66 J.L. Warner to Mort Blumenstock, April 7, 1951 (according to this telegram the “big quartet” are *Strangers On A Train*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, *Captain Horatio Hornblower*, and *Jim Thorpe, All-American*); and *Motion Picture Herald*, July 7, 1951, WB USC. Zaslow, “When the Red Scare Hit Pittsburgh,” p. 66.
Cvetic had already "hit the lecture trail" with some success. But Warner briefly turned him into a "one-man Chautauqua" (to quote a studio flack) for about a month in an effort to sell the film in the Northeast. Just as Cvetic's remuneration for the rights to his story was minimal, so too he earned little touring for Warner Brothers. The studio paid him $500 a week, plus expenses if he stayed overnight outside Pittsburgh—but all too often he wound up back there after midnight. The studio worked him hard. He spoke on the radio, spent time with the local press, addressed community groups. He spoke at luncheons, afternoon teas, dinners, and evening meetings. In Johnstown, Pennsylvania, for example, where he spent less than a day, Cvetic's activities included a broadcast discussion with local law enforcement officials at 11:30 a.m., and less than two hours later a talk and question-and-answer session at a high school assembly. His message did not vary whether speaking in Johnstown, Albany, New York, or Fairmont, West Virginia: Communists "bore from within" and must be exposed; Americans (especially students) "must be taught" what Communism is. If Americans relaxed their vigilance, Cvetic warned, the Communists would liquidate one-third of all Americans, and for Cvetic, the targeted people always seemed to include those he addressed, be they Lions, Legionnaires, church-going students, teachers, or Daughters of the American Revolution members.

The Warner Brothers public relations man who shepherded Cvetic on the film promotion tour commented, years later that "we built a monster" and remembered unhappily the "starlet-like vanity," lack of polish, pomposity, and "hitting the bottle" (which became such a problem that a two-quarts-a-day limit had to be imposed). Warner Brothers covered up for Cvetic, because it was in the studio's interest to do so, just as it had been for the FBI, which continued to protect

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67 Newsweek, May 14, 1951 (clipping), WB USC. Pamphlet attached to Mort Blumenstock to J.L. Warner, May 3, 1951, WB USC.
him publicly. But Bureau officials sharply reined in Cvetic and Warner Brothers when, in publicizing the movie, Cvetic made statements considered harmful to the FBI’s image. Hoover’s associates acted quickly, if behind the scenes, to ensure that Cvetic would not repeat what one of them accurately dubbed a “harebrained” charge that the FBI had left in place under surveillance the Communist head of a large California city’s water works who “could poison the city’s population in a matter of hours.”  

Such charges in time became the staples of Cvetic’s lectures and writing. By the end of the 1950s, he was asserting that “the Reds” were “infiltrating the churches in the United States” and that if the Communists took over “women would be forced into brothels maintained for Red soldiers.” But for some years after he surfaced in 1950, Cvetic had no need to sensationalize. Thanks to the anti-Communist frenzy, which gripped America during the first part of the 1950s, Cvetic made use of the image created for him to earn a reasonable income from lectures about his “undercover” experiences and his fairly rational prescriptions for dealing with “the Red menace.”  

His activities as a “habitual government witness” added significantly to Cvetic’s income. For a time, he had a contract with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which paid him $2,400 annually as a “consultant.” By 1955 he had testified in more than twenty denaturalization and deportation proceedings. Cvetic also testified in various proceedings on the federal and state level at the going rate of $25 a day plus $9 “in lieu of expenses,” remuneration that Richard Rovere pointed out at the time was by “government standards . . . fairly high pay.” Cvetic testified for the federal government in cases before the Subversive Activities Control Board (including actions against the Civil Rights Congress and the Labor Youth League) as well as in Smith Act prosecutions against CP leaders and members. He also testified in such state cases as Steve Nelson’s trial for sedition.
in Pennsylvania and the New York State Insurance Department's proceedings against the International Workers Order, a Communist-dominated fraternal society.\footnote{Murray Kempton, \textit{America Comes of Middle Age} (Boston, 1963), 25; D.M. Ladd to Hoover, Nov. 17, 1952, FBI Cvetic; “Commonwealth of Pennsylvania vs. Steve Nelson,” 771; Rovere, “Kept Witnesses,” p. 28; and Minutes of the Departmental Committee on Security Witnesses, April 10, 14, 21, June 21, July 7, Sept. 6, 8, 22, 1955; Jan. 14, 18, Feb. 6, 1957, Criminal Division, U.S. Dept. of Justice (this committee was composed of representatives of three Justice Dept. divisions—Internal Security, Criminal, and Immigration and Naturalization).}

In addition, Cvetic hired himself out to anyone who wished to make use of his ostensible expertise. Thus, he testified for the defense in the Connecticut court action resulting from the unsuccessful suit brought by the performers Larry Adler and Paul Draper against those responsible for blacklisting them. Cvetic also continued to appear before congressional committees, but with increasingly less impact on the media. He had passed from being a participant with personal revelations to being an “expert” on call as necessary. He concluded his remarks at one hearing with the rather pathetic reminder to committee members that “if there is anything I can do at any time, write to me at home.”\footnote{“Commonwealth of Pennsylvania vs. Steve Nelson,” 725; U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act . . . Committee on the Judiciary, \textit{Hearings}, “Communist Underground Printing Facilities and Illegal Propaganda,” 83rd Congress, 1st Session, July 10, 1953 (Washington, 1953), 336.}

The Cvetic image also benefited from a radio series, aired initially in 1952, supposedly chronicling his undercover experiences. As with the film, the radio series brought him little money but did keep him in the public eye. The Ziv Company paid Warner Brothers $10,000 for the radio rights to the title \textit{I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.} But Ziv paid Cvetic only $4,000 to “supply his services as an adviser, to waive the right to use his name, and to provide any material he had collected during the . . . years he worked for the F.B.I.” Cvetic also received $1,000 for travel to California (where the show was being set up) and expenses during the three weeks for which Ziv had contracted. The company also agreed during 1952-1953 “to set up a paid lecture tour” for Cvetic: $200 plus expenses “per single engagement”; $600 plus expenses for “a week’s engagement . . . lectures not to exceed four.” In 1958 Cvetic sued the Ziv Company for over $100,000, charging among other things it had shortchanged him by scheduling
as many as twelve lectures a week for which Cvetic received "no additional remuneration." Cvetic, by 1960, had reduced his demands to $10,000. The judge indicated he "would exert every pressure" on Cvetic's lawyer to accept $2,000; the Ziv Company offered nothing more than a "nuisance value settlement," which would "not exceed $1,000." The lawsuit failed.73

That was not the only legal action that resulted from the radio series. Sherman and Moore felt their contract with Cvetic entitled them to a percentage of his earnings from Ziv. That company's counsel concurred, asserting that Cvetic "is under certain duties and obligations to them and that, sooner or later, he will have to make his peace with them." Cvetic disagreed, maintaining that the radio series was "a separate venture." They sued. An annoyed Cvetic later reported that his share of "the radio proceeds was only 27 percent, agents and attorneys got the rest." An angry Sherman broke with Cvetic. He resented the need to sue, especially as he and Moore never "took a dime" of Cvetic's pay for promoting the film, despite a contractual right to do so. Moore recalls no bitterness on his part. He had "tired of babysitting" Cvetic, whose penchant for women and drink "made him just too much trouble."74

The radio version of *I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.* was produced in Los Angeles. The show for its day had a big budget, reportedly $12,500 per episode. Movie star Dana Andrews played Cvetic in the transcribed series of thirty-minute programs. Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee, later better-known for such Broadway hits as *Inherit The Wind*, scripted many of the programs. Altogether 78 programs were produced during 1952 and 1953 (the broadcast cycle then called for 39 original shows with 13 repeats during the summer). The company, headed by Frederic W. Ziv, an energetic, astute, successful syndicator


of radio and television shows, did a splendid job selling the show despite the inroads being made on radio programming by television. The company made use of the political climate of the day for commercial ends, garnering sponsors from anti-Communist businessmen and patriotic organizations. The Carter Oil Company, for example, headed by strong anti-Communists, sponsored the program on eight stations scattered across Colorado, Montana, and South Dakota. In various states American Legion posts obtained local sponsors. All across the country chambers of commerce, unions, and veteran organizations purchased the series for "public service broadcasts."

The radio shows bore even less relationship to reality than had the film. In one episode Cvetic prevents the murder of a liberal editor who realized the CP has duped him. During the course of another show, "The Little Red Schoolhouse," a "comrade from MOSCOW" provokes a college student riot and "a female comrade" masquerading as an American patriot makes love to Cvetic in order to test his loyalty to the party. The FBI agent who monitored the programs found them "the eeriest kind of cloak and dagger stuff." He judged the writing "poor," the plots "loose," the endings "juvenile." The historian Richard Gid Powers has noted that Andrews, in his portrayal of Cvetic, "used two voices": as the FBI man the actor "spoke in the earnest All-American tones of radio heroes" like the Lone Ranger; in his Communist persona he spoke with "a sort of boneheaded truculence as though he resented every treasonous moment he had to spend with the comrades." Commenting on this dichotomy and the implausibly tense situations faced each week by Cvetic, a Bureau observer concluded that the radio show "would make any potential informant cringe in terror"—a judgment shared by the annoyed Hoover.


76 M.A. Jones to L.B. Nichols, April 15, June 23, 1952, FBI Cvetic; Richard Gid Powers, G-Man: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture (Carbondale, 1983), 224-25; M.A. Jones to L.B. Nichols, April 1, 8, June 23, July 1, 1952, FBI Cvetic.
The FBI head, partly because he had anticipated such problems, rebuffed Ziv's overtures. Hoover refused to cooperate in the making or selling of the radio series. In January 1952, when he learned from various field officers that Ziv representatives, attempting to sell the series, had implied Bureau "approval," he demanded that the Ziv sales force stop making "false or misleading statements." The company speedily agreed to make it clear that the FBI "has not . . . endorsed, approved, or had any connection whatsoever with the radio program." Nonetheless, shortly thereafter Hoover notified all FBI offices that in response to any inquiries the Bureau should "forcibly" and "unmistakably" make clear that it had nothing to do with the radio program. Notwithstanding the Bureau's attitude, Ziv, a generation later, still felt positive about shows such as "I Was a Communist for the F.B.I." Discussing such programming, Ziv said that in the political context of the 1950s such shows "rendered a proper service." 77

To sell the series, the Ziv Company sent Cvetic around the country. He gave lectures and appeared on behalf of sponsors of the show. Local newspapers interviewed him, usually concluding their stories with a mention of the program. Cvetic consistently referred to himself as an "agent" of the FBI, which irritated Hoover. The FBI director, moreover, wanted "no part in Cvetic's promotion." Yet the Bureau seemed unable to rein him in. Cvetic enjoyed the tours, and he certainly benefited from them. The company benefited a great deal more. Depending on the market, the company charged between $13 and $400 for each episode broadcast. During 1952 and 1953, with over 600 stations signed up each year, that meant a substantial gross income per program. Once again real financial success had eluded Cvetic. He only grasped how Ziv and Warner had profited from him later in the 1950s; then, as he told an FBI agent, Cvetic understood he should "have taken better care of Matt." 78


Prior to 1955, however, Cvetic expressed little concern about his future. He had no reason to do so. He had an interesting life, even becoming a "Kentucky Colonel." He was sought after because of his supposed expertise. Indeed, at one point Cvetic was even used to influence local union elections: in August 1953 he sent an open letter to members of a steelworkers local in Oakmont, Pennsylvania, urging them not to vote for the candidate he knew as a "Communist stooge." Cvetic made a comfortable living from his anti-Communist activities on the lecture circuit and as a professional witness. The *Nation* in 1954 estimated his income to be as high as $15,000 annually at a time when the median family income in the United States did not exceed $5,000. That year he failed to become the Republican party candidate for the 28th Congressional District (central Pittsburgh), but ran a respectable race losing the May primary by less than 1,400 votes. Cvetic's acute

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Lawrence and Lee actually produced the series with Ziv advancing production costs and retaining 90 percent of the gross until these had been recouped. Thereafter, an increased percentage of the gross went to Lawrence and Lee. See Rouse, "A History of the F.W. Ziv . . . Companies," 151.
alcoholism and uneven mental state had not yet become common knowledge. His efforts on behalf of the film and the radio series seem to have tempered his unpredictable moods. During much of 1953 and 1954, Cvetic participated in Alcoholics Anonymous and had been able to control his drinking. But in February and March 1955, Cvetic was, upon the application of his son Richard, twice confined in the psychiatric division of a Pittsburgh hospital. The admitting doctors found Cvetic not only a “chronic alcoholic” but also “restless, agitated, . . . suspicious.” Shock treatment was administered at least four times.  

Not long after his hospital stay, Cvetic told the FBI he felt “all washed up.” An agent who interviewed him found Cvetic “extremely depressed.” That depression must have deepened as a result of fatal blows to his career as a professional witness. On June 1, 1955, the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit rendered an opinion that found his testimony “conflicting,” “evasive,” and of “no more probative value than . . . tattlings from a town meeting.” On June 10-11, 1955, Cvetic testified before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. Much of his inconsistent testimony concerned the alleged Communist affiliations of John J. Mullen, a steelworkers’ union official. Mullen also testified before the committee, systematically and convincingly contradicting the allegations. Subsequently, the Department of Justice formally “disapproved the use of Cvetic as a witness in Government prosecution.”

The Bureau had no official comment on Cvetic’s failings. But Hoover always had doubts about him. Just days after Cvetic’s initial

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HUAC testimony in 1950, Hoover had it gone over in detail. The review of that testimony found (as Hoover must have suspected) that Cvetic, while "fairly accurate," had made "errors." Notwithstanding this review and subsequent other reports—such as the one from a Pittsburgh FBI agent who found Cvetic "definitely unreliable" and capable of "dishonest statements"—Hoover put Cvetic forth as a potential witness for use by government attorneys prosecuting subversion cases. Hoover, the complete bureaucrat, also called attention to what he termed "another side of the ledger" but without emphasis. Not until February 1953 did Hoover tell his associates to inform the government attorneys that "the use of Cvetic in any government case would be most unfortunate." Hoover's pronouncement in part stemmed from concern that Cvetic's problems and exaggerations might undermine not only his credibility but also that of other professional witnesses developed by the FBI. And in part Hoover had acted in consternation at the fact that Cvetic (to use one agent's words) "had capitalized beyond all reason on his position as an informant for the Bureau."81

FBI personnel recognized Cvetic as a "highly potential source of embarrassment to the Bureau." The FBI dealt gingerly with him after he surfaced. In 1956 Cvetic got a severe dressing down from Bureau personnel. This run-in with the Bureau resulted from Cvetic's jealousy of Herbert A. Philbrick, a middle-level CP official who had surfaced as an FBI informant during the 1949 Smith Act trials. Philbrick had carved out a more successful career as a professional anti-Communist than Cvetic. Philbrick's memoir, I Led Three Lives ("citizen, Communist, counterspy"), written with the unacknowledged assistance of the Bureau's public relations arm, became a best seller and served as the basis for a highly successful Ziv television series. In April 1956, the Bureau learned that Cvetic had charged that Philbrick was "receiving

81 SAC Pitts. to Hoover, March 13, 1950 (to which is appended a 36-page memo) and June 21, 1950 (which is another multi-page review of Cvetic's testimony); A.H. Belmont to D.M. Ladd, Oct. 18, 1950 (which quotes the Pittsburgh agent); Hoover to Assistant Attorney General James M. Mclnerney, Criminal Division, Dec. 27, 1950; handwritten comment on D.M. Ladd to Hoover, Feb. 3, 1953; L.L. Laughlin to A.H. Belmont, July 23, 1952—all in FBI Cvetic. D.M. Ladd to Hoover, Feb. 17, 1953, FBI Cvetic, reviews the Bureau's supposed warnings about Cvetic, but the letters and memos referred to seem inconclusive to me.
better treatment” and questioned him about statements he allegedly made accusing Philbrick of having paid “kickback money” to two FBI agents and of being “a left-winger”—charges Cvetic denied. Cvetic also raised questions about Hoover’s “drinking.” Cvetic was “forcefully told” that he should “shut up,” that the “Bureau would not tolerate malicious gossip or false statements regarding the director, the FBI, or Bureau personnel.”  

A contrite Cvetic abjectly apologized but to no avail. As Richard Gid Powers has pointed out, “once Hoover decided he would not trust someone that person was marked for life.” Cvetic continued periodically to send what he described as “a little report” to the FBI, but Bureau policy now decreed that any correspondence from Cvetic not be answered. On one occasion, his report did pique Hoover’s interest, and agents were sent to interview Cvetic. His obsequious letters to Hoover also invariably went unacknowledged (on them is noted in various hands “no ack. necess.”). Cvetic did not seem to have fully grasped the FBI’s changed attitude toward him for a long time.  

He certainly remained unaware of how often the Bureau undercut his efforts to recapture the limelight. A momentary interest by Philbrick’s editor in publishing Cvetic’s memoirs ended after discussion with a Bureau official. Cvetic, who anticipated a $1,000 advance, believed the editor “walked” because of “some self-serving person.” Ultimately, in late 1959, Cvetic privately printed his memoir, The Big Decision, as a paperback and later claimed it went through three printings. More fiction than fact, The Big Decision drew heavily on the

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82 M.A. Jones to L.B. Nichols, Oct. 3, 1955; J.A. Sizoo to A.H. Belmont, April 5, 1956; FBI Pitts. to Hoover, telex, April 6, 1956, FBI Cvetic. Herbert A. Philbrick, I Led Three Lives (New York, 1953). O’Reilly, Hoover and the Un-Americans, 232; Caute, The Great Fear, 574 (n14). Cvetic later declared that in 1951, while negotiating with the Ziv Co. about the radio series, he had been told that Hoover would endorse Philbrick’s story if Ziv used it: FBI Pitts. to Hoover, April 6, 1956, FBI Cvetic. Frederic Ziv, on the other hand, recalls that whenever at this time he broached the use of Philbrick’s story, the FBI would always sidetrack him onto Cvetic: telephone interview with Ziv, Aug. 5, 1990.  

83 Powers, Secrecy and Power, 305. It was, as Powers argues, a no-lose situation for Hoover. If the person “was subsequently unfriendly to the Bureau, that validated Hoover’s judgment.” If the person was friendly, “it proved his sincerity.” A.H. Belmont to L.V. Boardman, Oct. 10, 1957; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, April 30, 1958; Hoover to SAC Los Angeles, May 15, 1958; A.H. Belmont to L.V. Boardman, May 28, 1958; Cvetic to Hoover, Feb. 24, March 19, Sept. 14, 1958, FBI Cvetic.
experiences of the Cvetic character as portrayed on screen and over the airwaves. The Bureau also hampered Cvetic’s efforts to find backers for his lecture tours. A Bureau form letter advised groups and businessmen who checked with the FBI that “it in no way” endorsed Cvetic’s activities, that he did “not in any way represent the FBI.” The Bureau kept watch on Cvetic even after he moved to Los Angeles in early 1958. But when anyone, even a U.S. Senator “friendly” to the Bureau, asked how to contact Cvetic, the FBI simply replied that “no information was available” concerning his “present activities or whereabouts.”

The Bureau’s campaign had some effect initially. Cvetic for a while had lean pickings—so much so that he could not afford any assistance. To avoid seeming a one-man operation, he revived his pseudonym Robert Stanton, signing it as “Administrative Assistant” to various mailings. In order to survive, Cvetic moved out of the anti-Communist mainstream. He continued to play up his one-time FBI ties (all his promotional literature, even his calling card contained the words “former FBI counterspy”), but now he worked not with the Bureau but with fringe groups among the “Radical Right.” He became part of Billy James Hargis’s Christian Crusade as a recruiter for the John Birch Society. He now echoed his new colleagues’ charges about “Communist infiltration of our churches” and “Red use . . . of the mental health machine,” as well as their attacks on individuals such as Steve Allen, Cyrus Eaton, and Dr. Linus Pauling as “followers of the Communist line.”

Nichols to Tolson, Feb. 14, 18, 1957; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, April 11, 1957, FBI Cvetic. Although it refused formally to review Cvetic’s manuscript for fear he “might use this” for further publicity, the Bureau had been able to obtain a copy “without his knowledge” and had gone over it thoroughly: see note at end of telex, FBI Pitts. to Hoover, Jan. 14, 1957; SAC Pitts. to Hoover, Jan. 28, 1957, FBI Cvetic. Cvetic, The Big Decision, passim; SAC Los Angeles to Hoover, March 29, 1961; Cvetic to American Legion, Oct. 29, 1957 (copy); Hoover to SAC Pitts., Jan. 22, 1959; ? (Badger, MN) to Hoover, March 16, 1958; Francis Case to Hoover, March 4, 1959; Hoover to Case, March 10, 1959, FBI Cvetic. Cvetic, “Communists in Our Churches,” enclosure with Cvetic to Hoover, April 11, 1961, FBI Cvetic.
Cvetic had found new sponsors. Representative John Rousselot, a Republican from California and an active John Bircher, placed a number of Cvetic’s articles in the *Congressional Record*. Cvetic even got some limited play in the Los Angeles press, more than he deserved. He had a young woman associate described as “beautiful,” and in 1961 it was reported they would wed “soon.” He seems to have pulled himself together and controlled his drinking and anxieties. But in attaching himself to the far right, Cvetic once again seems to have miscalculated. Cvetic went right just as the national mood shifted in the opposite direction. The political, social, and cultural changes that transformed the United States in the 1960s would swamp the Radical Right. That transformation had already begun by July 26, 1962, when Cvetic died of a heart attack while waiting to take a driver’s exam at the Hollywood branch of the California Department of Motor Vehicles.  

There is no need to feel sorry for Cvetic. He was not an admirable man. He lived a deceitful, generally unattractive life, marred by alcoholism, womanizing, and emotional instability. He betrayed his friends and supporters both before and after he surfaced as an FBI informant. Because of petty greed, stupid recklessness, and an indifferent morality, he damaged himself, his family, and a host of other people. Yet all these flaws notwithstanding, it seems to me that ultimately Cvetic was a sad figure, and that his life is a sad tale—not because he proved unable to capitalize properly on his FBI experiences, not because the media exploited him, and not because the FBI turned on him. The sadness lies in the fact that someone like Cvetic had the impact he did, that the standards of American society had become so

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twisted that it took six years for Cvetic's testimony to be successfully challenged in court. Steve Nelson might himself not be beyond reproach, but he is absolutely right in asserting that the saddest part of Cvetic's story is that "he was believed."87

That Cvetic, unlike so many other professional anti-Communists, is still remembered has nothing to do with his place in history. He is not unique. There were many other active anti-Communists, a significant number of whom played a more important role in the domestic Cold War. They, like Cvetic, also had a symbiotic relationship with the media. Yet in the main only individuals with a special interest in the period remember Elizabeth Bentley, Louis Budenz, or John Lautner. Their flame may have in its time shone more brightly than Cvetic's, but it has been a long time since they were on the nation's television screens fighting Red subversion. But Cvetic continues his battles as a Communist for the FBI wherever and whenever a station broadcasts the film. No matter how bad the movie, no matter how far removed from reality, I Was a Communist for the F.B.I. continues to form the viewer's image of Matt Cvetic. For us, the Cold War has ended, the "evil empire" is breaking up, but on television I Was a Communist for the F.B.I. remains history and reality.88

Seton Hall University

Daniel J. Leab

88 There were many others who could have been mentioned who are now almost forgotten, such as Paul Crouch and Manning Johnson. I chose to list Bentley, Budenz, and Lautner because they, along with Whitaker Chambers, have been studied in detail by Herbert Packer in Ex-Communist Witnesses: Four Studies in Fact Finding (Stanford, 1962).