

What is McCarthyism

What was McCarthyism? The dictionary describes McCarthyism this way:

1. The practice of making accusations of disloyalty, especially of pro-Communist activity, in many instances unsupported by proof or based on slight, doubtful, or irrelevant evidence.
2. The practice of making unfair allegations or using unfair investigative techniques, especially in order to restrict dissent or political criticism.

Joe McCarthy was a Senator from Wisconsin who took a stance against liberal people. He worked with the FBI to accuse many of being Communist. During the McCarthy era, thousands of Americans were accused of being Communist or Communist sympathizers. Primary targets were government employees, entertainers and others in the entertainment industry, educators and union activists. Many Jewish people were on the list. They were called before The House Committee on Un-American Activities, commonly referred to as HUAC.

This committee soon began to subpoena screenwriters, directors and other movie industry professionals to testify. The sixty-four thousand dollar question, as it became known, was “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United

States?” They were also asked to name names of people they knew who were members of the Communist Party.

Among the many that were called before the committee, the most famous group were ten men from the movie industry. They were called before the Committee and decided not to cooperate. They became known as the “Hollywood Ten”. I have a signed copy of the book called *Hollywood on Trial* by Gordon Kahn, signed to my parents by Dalton Trumbo, one of the men accused. “To Ted and Ida with thanks and affection.” These men cited the first amendment of free speech and free assembly, which they believed would protect them from prosecution, but it didn’t work. They were all sentenced for contempt of court. Two of the men were sentenced to six months in jail and the rest to one year.

On November 25, 1947, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America announced the firing of the Hollywood Ten and stated, “We will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States.” They had never admitted to being Communist. This became known as the Hollywood Blacklist.

I think there were two reasons why the Jewish people were accused more than others. One reason was because at that time most Jewish people were liberal. The second was that most had come to this country from Russia. The government was afraid of Communism taking over the country. It was the time of the Cold War with Russia. Joe McCarthy took the position that all liberal and Russian immigrants were Communist. The government believed him.

Future witnesses who decided not to cooperate pleaded the Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination. Although this did protect them from prison, many were fired from their jobs. Once fired from jobs under these circumstances, they could no longer get work anywhere else.

I learned while researching that our friend Forest Wiggins was a professor at the University of Minnesota and fired from his job on the grounds that he had not published anything, but he actually had. He was a member of the Progressive Party, liberal, and black. All the criteria for being accused of being a Communist. At that time if you were fired from a teaching position, you could never get another job in Minnesota. He moved back to South Carolina. That is why we never saw him again.

It also became clear that Hollywood would not survive without these men. Many worked under ghost names to produce, direct and write for movies over the next few years while the blacklist was still in effect.

No wonder I don't like politics or want anything to do with it. How did something like this happen?

Grandma Supak was born Shrifka Katz, the English translation is Sophie, on August 25, 1890, in a small town outside of Berdichev, Russia. She also comes from an Orthodox Jewish family and started working at the age of ten to help support her parents, brothers and sisters. For a short time, she was a seamstress, but not paid. Seamstresses had to do an apprenticeship for several years before getting paid. She worked with an older girl who took her under her wing. The older girl was involved in the socialist movement and got her involved. She finally got paid while working at a chair-making factory. These chairs were called bentwood chairs because the wood was bent into a round shape molded for the back. Bentwood chairs are still made today. The women in the factory soaked the dowels in caustic chemicals that softened them enough to bend. She was the oldest girl in her family, and had a great deal of responsibilities. She was used to working hard by the time she came to the United States.

She learned to read and write with other children in secret gatherings at night. The group of women who taught the girls were known as “the young socialists”. At age nine, she joined the girls in an effort to organize the maids who worked for the wealthy Russians. My grandmother had an early and humanistic start in politics. They all believed the same way and started going to secret meetings about the politics in Russia. She met my grandfather at one of the meetings. She was fourteen years old. Although she was very shy, she learned very quickly and had very strong opinions about what she believed.

My grandmother came into this country through Canada. In Minnesota she was very active politically. She attended meetings called “The Women’s Circle”, where all the women got together to talk politics. There were other meetings held by the Progressive Party at several locations around the Twin Cities. She was accused of being a Communist in the years that Joe McCarthy was in office.

It is a politically scary time for my parents and grandparents. I know this because I hear them talking. I remember when I was about six or seven years old we went to a convention in Chicago and I stood up on a chair to see what was going on. Dad told me a man named Paul Robison was speaking. Later after we are back home I hear him say, “The FBI is following us.” Dad says, “I saw a friend on the street today, and when he saw me, he crossed to the other side so he wouldn’t have to talk to me.”

As I grow up I learn that it was the time when Senator Joe McCarthy was at the height of his witch hunt of liberal people. My family and some of their friends were accused of being Communist. A vast majority of the people accused are Jewish. By 1951, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has started files on most everyone accused. The FBI watches where my parents and grandparents go and who they talk to. The FBI even checks the mailboxes to see what

mail they get. I'm still not sure what it all means, but I can tell everyone is scared. Dad is still gone a lot of nights playing his violin, and Mom still has friends over, but they go to a lot of meetings with my grandparents. Sometimes we go along when the meetings are at my grandparents house. I usually just watch TV or play with my cousins if they are there also.

For a short time we go to Jewish Sunday school. It is an old house on Park Avenue with a long wooden staircase. All us kids are running up and down. We're sitting on the floor listening to music, and singing "It's a Small World After All". All the friends and family that I know are here. I realize it's a school for all the kids whose parents feel about religion as my parents do. We are learning history and heritage, not religion. After about a year we don't go anymore because people are afraid

I think about and wonder what their fear feels like. Is it the same as mine? I never ask them.