

The Invisible Harry Gold

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**THE
INVISIBLE
HARRY
GOLD**

The Man
Who Gave the
Soviets the
Atom Bomb

Allen M. Hornblum

Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

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To Gregory M. Harvey

Who follows John D. M. Hamilton and Augustus S. Ballard in maintaining the
highest standards of the Philadelphia Bar

'Tis education forms the common mind,
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.

—ALEXANDER POPE, *Epistle to Cobham* (1734)

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Preface

Everyone was there that warm August day in 1972: doctors and nurses, medical technicians from the pathology lab, blood bank workers, and others, from administration to housekeeping, who staffed John F. Kennedy Hospital in Northeast Philadelphia. They had come to pay their last respects to a unique and cherished colleague. The hospital's chief chemist, well known for his generosity and patience, was about to be lowered into his final resting place, a few yards from his beloved mother at Har Nebo Cemetery.

Some mourners had no idea that the dead man was anything other than an endearing, if slightly eccentric, member of the hospital's medical team. But most of the people now shedding tears and holding each other's hands were aware that their friend, mentor, and colleague had an infamous past. Despite his singularly unimpressive exterior, Harry Gold had been a gifted and devoted secret agent who spent years providing the Soviet Union with industrial and military secrets, including the greatest prize of all: the secrets to the atomic bomb.

Gold's dutiful and substantive work won him the Order of the Red Star, one of the Soviet Union's highest honors. The FBI's director J. Edgar Hoover had called him a "master Soviet spy" and described the nationwide manhunt that preceded his arrest as "the toughest case the FBI ever faced."¹ The portly, amiable, occasionally absent-minded chemist was the antithesis of the suave, physically imposing James Bond, but whereas Bond was fiction, Gold was the real deal. It was not a fact that was easily

assimilated. Dumbfounded by the realization that his innocuous-looking neighbor was a former secret agent—one who was said to have significantly jeopardized his countrymen—Northeast Philadelphia resident Milton Bolno exclaimed, “You’d never in a million years believe this guy was a spy.”² But Gold was not only an accomplished agent and Soviet courier. He was the centerpiece of what Hoover would call “the crime of the century.”³

That he was an enigma is beyond question, but the mystery of Harry Gold is deeper than the obvious paradox of a kind, apolitical sugar refinery worker rising to the high ranks of a foreign power’s clandestine operations. Granted, the thought of a shy nebbish pulling off cloak-and-dagger capers is intriguing, and his ability to carry them off so expertly for so long is a story in itself, but Gold was also one of the most denounced, slandered, and demonized figures in twentieth-century America. Labeled a “pathological liar,” a “forlorn creature,” a “weakling,” an “inveterate liar,” a “twisted and degenerate mind,” and a “fantasist” by political opponents posing as investigative journalists, he was subjected to long-distance amateur diagnoses of “*pseudologia fantastica*” and labeled a “pathologic imposter whose only means of gratifying a lifetime of starved emotional needs was in the acting out of a spy career based on nothing more than his fantasy wish-fulfillments.”⁴ It is safe to say that no one at Har Nebo Cemetery on the day of his burial would have recognized their friend in this bizarre and cruel description.

How had the person one co-worker called “an adorable little pet we all wanted to take care of” become the object of such scorn and outrage?⁵ The calumny heaped upon Gold during his life and long after his death was only partially due to his disloyalty and criminal acts. It had far more to do with his confession to those acts and his naming of others who had similarly served the Soviet Union. Harry Gold was the human tripwire that brought down a host of Americans who had spied for the Soviet Union during the 1930s and 1940s. The most famous of these were Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in June 1953. Upon being put to death at Sing Sing Prison, they immediately became martyrs to millions of Americans who desperately wanted to imagine the young couple as innocent victims of a hysteria that was destroying the nation’s liberal and democratic principles. Anti-Communist paranoia had polluted the land, these people argued, and right-wing lawmakers and a reactionary fanaticism personified by Hoover’s FBI were working to root out not only New Deal liberalism but every form of progressive thought in America.

Within a few years, a vibrant cottage industry of authors and researchers, magazine and newspaper columnists, pamphleteers, and eventually documentary filmmakers emerged to exonerate the Rosenbergs and vilify their accusers. A key witness against the Rosenbergs, and the man whose credibility it was most necessary to destroy, was Harry Gold. As one of the former associates he sent to prison said, "This little man set off an explosion that is still reverberating around the world."⁶

Like his fellow spy Elizabeth Bentley five years earlier, Gold had told all. But whereas Bentley's confession resulted in relatively few criminal prosecutions, Gold's was a windfall. According to one high-ranking FBI agent, Gold's knowledge of Soviet operations led to cases "breaking everywhere—dozens of them every day." In quantity and quality, the information "devolving from the confession of Harry Gold was enormous."⁷ As spectacular arrests, trials, and convictions accumulated during 1950 and 1951, more and more observers grew curious about the timid, sad-eyed Philadelphia bachelor who had inspired the investigations and would prove equally effective as a prosecution witness.

Regrettably for Gold, the Rosenbergs' defenders did a far more effective job of defining him than did the government or the news media. Motivated by a religious fervor to discredit the ones who had destroyed the Rosenbergs, they targeted the informers for abuse. Like Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley before him, Gold would be mauled by partisan wordsmiths until lifelong friends and co-workers had difficulty recognizing him. In addition to naming names, he had conceded his guilt without even putting up a fight. Extraordinary detective work nailed Gold, not hard evidence. Without his cooperation and confession, it is very unlikely he would have been convicted. Even if Klaus Fuchs had been willing to testify against him—which is doubtful—the British government would never have let Fuchs appear in an American courtroom. Gold could have walked, and without him many others would not have been indicted, imprisoned, or executed. His actions destroyed the lives of many clandestine Communist activists in America.

Once he started to talk, Gold could be seen in two ways: either he was a traitor who had sold his country down the river or he was a delusional psychotic whose "pathological needs" propelled him to become "a pseudologist of the first rank."⁸ In the eyes of the public, he would become both. The criminal justice system confirmed the former identity, and defenders of the Rosenbergs worked diligently to brand him as the latter. Their campaign was facilitated by Gold's shy manner and short

stature. He seemed made to order for bullies, whether they were neighborhood ruffians who beat him up with their fists or polysyllabic political activists who used a pen and typewriter.

The short, overweight Gold, with his odd gait and obsessive personality, offered a striking contrast with the dashing, handsome, distinguished-looking Alger Hiss and William Remington—two contemporaries who also led double lives and eventually became tenants of Lewisburg Penitentiary, though for much shorter terms than Gold. Gold did not graduate from an elite prep school and prestigious Ivy League university or have a distinguished family lineage. Introverted and isolated, he was relatively easy to stigmatize.

Yet it was Gold who told the truth about his career as a spy, and Julius Rosenberg who lied about his commitment and actions on behalf of Communism and the Soviet Union. Interestingly, both men devoted years of their lives to the Soviet cause—Harry even longer than Julius—but whereas Gold grew weary of his covert activities and dubious about Russia's "grand experiment," Rosenberg remained firm in his commitment and willing to give his life for the cause. When both were caught in 1950, Gold divulged everything; Rosenberg denied everything.

For the rest of the century, dueling authors and scholars would remain intransigent on the guilt or innocence of the Rosenbergs. Harry Gold remained central to the story but was increasingly viewed as a mystifying oddball. Where others—such as Chambers, Bentley, Hiss, Harry Dexter White, Judith Coplon, Remington, and Joel Barr—had their lives and motivations fully fleshed out in biographies, Gold remained a scholarly orphan, an intriguing Zelig who seemed to be everywhere, and the lone figure from that era still denied an accurate historical account rather than a politically motivated caricature. It is gratifying to rectify this half-century-long sin of omission by helping throw "a shaft of light . . . upon the life of Harry Gold."⁹

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, a steady stream of once-secret Soviet and American documents, KGB memoirs, and independent scholarship has added fresh evidence to what we knew about Soviet espionage in America. The revelations in 1992 by Vasili Mitrokhin, a former KGB agent; the National Security Agency's 1995 release of the Venona decrypts (World War II KGB and GRU cables); Alexander Feklisov's account of his KGB career in 2001; and most recently the notebooks of Alexander Vassiliev, a former KGB agent, which opened an extensive portion of KGB archives to public scrutiny—all these have not only contributed a better understanding of Soviet spy missions in Amer-

ica but have also confirmed the hundreds of U.S. citizens who chose to work secretly for Soviet intelligence organizations. Such documentation should make the scholarly study of Communism and the Cold War less of a brutal ideological battlefield.

Harry Gold's significant role in KGB operations in America and his subsequent role in their destruction are delineated in these newly released documents. My own research and interviews with Gold-era associates might also contribute to a better understanding of this period. Some will continue to reject these sources and cling to comfortable decades-old canards. During my research, I came into contact with a number of people whose minds seemed shackled by 1950s and 60s notions of Gold as a "fantasist" and "FBI dupe," as propounded by John Wexley and Walter and Miriam Schneir.

This mindset seems immune to new scholarship and recent archival discoveries. In my university office between classes a few years ago, for instance, I received a telephone call from a woman who wanted to know if I was "the Allen Hornblum who is writing a biography of Harry Gold." I was surprised, since there had been no publicity about my intention, and I had told only a few friends and colleagues about my research. I asked her how she had learned I was involved in such a book project, but she declined to answer. She also refused to tell me her name. But she did ask whether I intended the Gold book as follow-up to an earlier book of mine entitled *Acres of Skin*. Now I was really mystified; I had no idea what the caller was talking about. *Acres of Skin* is an exposé and history concerning the use of prison inmates as test subjects for medical experiments. I could not see its relationship to World War II spying and Harry Gold. When I told her I didn't understand her question, she proceeded to inform me that Gold had been used as a human guinea pig by the FBI while incarcerated in Philadelphia's Holmesburg Prison. He had been programmed to recite a narrative of his involvement in Soviet spy missions according to a script he had been given. When I told her that in all my years of research on both the Holmesburg medical experiments and Harry Gold I had seen no evidence to support her story, she became quite upset. I had either not researched the subject thoroughly enough, she suggested, or I was hiding evidence. She was certain Gold had been subjected to government experiments in mind control. That is the only reason he would have admitted to things he didn't do and testified against an innocent couple, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.

Other comments were a little more grounded in reality. A friend, a retired public school principal, expressed dismay that I was writing a book

about Harry Gold. His concern had to do with revisiting a dark chapter in the lives of many American Jews, who found it embarrassing that so many Jewish Americans had gravitated to the Communist banner in the 1930s and 40s and were even willing to spy for the Soviet Union. Why, my friend asked, did I have to write about that subject. It was only going to reopen old wounds and get people thinking about Jews and Communism again.

With all due deference to those who share my friend's concern, I do not subscribe to the notion that history should be written to fit one's ideological needs or that truth should be suppressed, twisted, or slanted to foster one's political agenda. Why American Jews and others were drawn to Communism in the face of the Great Depression and the rise of Fascism in Europe is a legitimate issue for exploration and debate. The life of Harry Gold is a good vehicle for examining that issue.

Like many other first-generation Americans early in the last century, Harry Gold led a life fraught with difficulty and hardship. He was an intelligent, highly motivated youth from a good family who approached the world with the best of intentions, but his life took a bizarre and ultimately heartbreaking turn from which he would never recover. The enigma of Harry Gold, the world's most unlikely secret agent, is long overdue for serious examination. Samson Golodnitsky envisioned great things for his son in America, but a couple of missteps led his bright, inquisitive, and hardworking golden boy on a singularly tragic journey.

Part 1

The Spy

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South Philadelphia

Samson Golodnitsky grew up accustomed to slightly more comfortable circumstances than most of his hard-pressed Jewish neighbors in Smila, on the Tyasmyn River in central Ukraine. His father was a relatively prosperous businessman. Even the wealthiest and most accomplished Jewish families were saddled with governmental restrictions and social constraints, but Samson went to good schools and showed promise, particularly in mathematics.

While at school, Samson became greatly influenced—“infected” was the term used by one subsequent observer—by the life, works, and philosophy of the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. During the late nineteenth century, Tolstoy “preached the idea of the nobility of labor.” “Any man could look God or himself in the eye . . . who worked with his hands toward the welfare of the community,” Samson’s son would later recall.¹ By the 1890s, with most of his greatest literary works behind him, Tolstoy was involved in a spiritual quest that caused him to “identify with the poor and the oppressed, to abandon his wealth, to live in peace and forgiveness with all men.”²

The Russian literary giant’s search for truth and meaning not only influenced many of his countrymen but also drew adherents around the world. Samson Golodnitsky was one of his converts, so taken with Tol-

stoy's pronouncements that he renounced his family's wealth, resisted his father's plans for him, and set about to make his way using his own hands. Sent to Switzerland for more schooling, he rarely attended classes and began to earn his own living as a woodworker, believing, as Tolstoy preached, that "the only men of stature in the community were those who worked with their hands."³ Though he would never renounce that viewpoint, Samson would soon fall in love with a young woman in Switzerland who would replace Tolstoy as the dominant force in his life.

Celia Ominsky was born into a large Jewish family in a small town in central Ukraine in 1881. Her father, a carpenter, was "an extremely pious man." He often found it difficult to provide for his family, but he was devoted to the faith of his fathers and in times of need was heard to say "*Got veln tsushteln*" ("God will provide"). The oldest female of seventeen siblings, Celia was "quite precocious" as a child and had not only "learned to read and write Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian" but by fourteen was giving Hebrew lessons to children in her village. She was sent to Kiev to further her education, but lack of funds and the societal constraints on Jews in tsarist Russia greatly restricted her educational possibilities.⁴

According to her son's recollection a half-century later, Celia worked part time in a bakery and dutifully completed her gymnasium assignments but was gradually radicalized by Russia's harsh political and economic conditions. In the 1890s she became a supporter of the rapidly growing Zionist movement. But she quickly grew disillusioned and joined the Socialist Workers before switching to a "revolutionary" group. According to family legend, her participation involved some dangerous political intrigue—as when an attractive young revolutionary officer persuaded her to transport bombs in a market basket.⁵

Frustrated by the lack of opportunity in her native country, Celia Ominsky left Russia for Paris while still a teenager and enrolled herself in a "mechanical dentistry" program. Bright, energetic, and possessed with a desire to improve her lot in life, Celia did well in her coursework, but after two years her funds were nearly depleted. For the time being her formal education came to an end.⁶ Focusing now on economic survival, Celia left Paris for Switzerland and what she hoped would be a temporary job rolling cigars and cigarettes. With luck she might save enough money to return to Paris and complete her dental studies.

It was in Bern that the two young Ukrainian Jews met and fell in love. Samson was immediately smitten with Celia's comely features, her spirit, her desire for knowledge, and her self-assurance. Celia was equally taken with Samson's quiet, unassuming manner, the handsome figure he cut

with his stylish Kaiser Wilhelm mustache, and his regal bearing on the rare occasions when he was attired in the fashionable clothes of the day.⁷ Samson and Celia were married in 1907 or 1908 and set about making a home for themselves. Life was not easy, and soon they had an extra mouth to feed. On December 12, 1910, Heinrich Golodnitsky was born in Bumplitz, a suburb of Bern.⁸ With his “long and very blond curls,” penchant for chocolate, and doting parents, little Heinrich should have been a happy child, but his subsequent recollections show that he was aware of his parents’ daily struggles and “dismal” prospects. His father had promised to “go to night school in nearby Zurich” where a “famous Polytechnic Institute” was located, but he never did. His mother was still working for a modest wage in the cigarette factory.

By early 1914 the Golodnitskys had “come to the conclusion that the future in Switzerland was extremely limited.” They decided, like millions of others across the continent, to start over in the New World.⁹

Golodnitskys Become Golds

With hopes for a better life and a good bit of trepidation, Samson Golodnitsky, aged thirty-three, Celia, thirty-two, and three-year old Heinrich boarded the S.S. *Lapland* in Antwerp, Belgium, and sailed for America.¹⁰ The *Lapland*, along with its cargo of mostly Russian and central European immigrants, arrived in New York Harbor on July 13, 1914.¹¹ It was at Ellis Island, according to Gold, that the family’s awkward last name was anglicized. When a U.S. immigration official suggested to Samson—who barely spoke English—“Why don’t you change your name to something simple, so you won’t always be plagued with this spelling difficulty—something, say, like ‘Gold’”? Samson, “ever willing to oblige,” agreed, and little Heinrich Golodnitsky became Harry Gold.¹²

The Golds traveled to Chicago, where they stayed for just under a year in “pretty miserable” circumstances. Gold recalls his family sharing “a ramshackle hovel” with another family while his mother went to work in a tobacco factory. His father did heavy manual labor in a Chicago coal yard for “pitifully low wages” because his “non-existent English kept him from explaining to the people at the employment agency that he had skills as a woodworker, and at mathematics and bookkeeping.”¹³ The brutally cold winters and scorching summers did little to endear the area to the Golds.

In 1915, the family decided to move again. Samson heard that there was work available in the shipyards of Norfolk, Virginia, where he had some wealthy relatives who were long established in the retail business.

But Celia decided on a more cautious approach and took her son to Philadelphia, where her brother Shama had settled. If the Norfolk venture did not pan out, some members of the family would already be situated in their next likely destination.¹⁴

That's exactly how things turned out. Work in the shipyards was sporadic, living conditions in Norfolk "were horrible," and the well-off relatives took no interest in the latest Golodnitsky to arrive. The Golds reunited in Philadelphia, one of the oldest and largest industrial towns in America.

Philadelphia in the early years of the twentieth century was a noisy, hazy brew of bustling factories, smoke-belching chimneys, horse-drawn delivery wagons, crowded streetcars, and ethnically diverse neighborhoods. European immigration was placing its stamp on the city's residential landscape, and like the vast majority of their *landsmanshaft*, the Golds gravitated to South Philadelphia. Bounded by the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers to its east, west, and south, and with Center City Philadelphia to its north, South Philadelphia was home to a rich mixture of Italian, Irish, Polish, and Jewish immigrants. From the nearby docks where the big European ships dropped their wretched but hopeful human cargo, many Jews fanned out through the neighborhood's Jewish quarter looking for friends and relatives who could help with shelter and employment.

Eastern European Jews had been coming to America in significant numbers since the 1880s, and the section of South Philly between Third and Tenth streets, and between Snyder and Oregon avenues, may have been—with the exception of New York's Lower East Side—the heart of Jewish religious, commercial, and residential life in America. By 1920, nearly a hundred thousand Jews lived in South Philadelphia, and though the numbers would gradually decline as Jews looked to newer, less congested neighborhoods like Strawberry Mansion, Mt. Airy, or Overbrook Park, a portion of South Philly would retain a distinctive Jewish ambience well past mid-century.¹⁵

The Jewish quarter was flanked by Italians to the west and Irish to the east. To its south was "the Neck," home to a rough collection of hog tenders and subsistence farmers. South Philly real estate was staked out along ethnic and religious lines, and woe to those who forgot it.¹⁶ Inter-ethnic relations were "far from peaceful, and territory was often defended" to the point of bloodshed. Most American-born Jewish residents had vivid memories of anti-Semitic insults and of being frequently attacked on the way to school.¹⁷

Sam and Celia Gold, however, were not expecting rose petals to be tossed at their feet. They were familiar with the harsh realities of life and

only asked for a roof over their heads and the opportunity to earn a living. The Golds lived for a few months with Celia's brother, who presided over his own brood of eight adults and children in a six-room row house on the 2500 block of South Sixth Street. Sam Gold found work at a succession of firms, including the Lester Piano Company, the Pooley cabinet-making firm, and the Belber Trunk and Bag Company. Celia found a job outside the neighborhood in an Arch Street sweatshop. The income allowed the Golds to move from their single room to three rooms in another South Sixth Street residence, and in 1916, to one of the newly built homes on the 2600 block of South Second Street. Though they were still renting and had to share the house with another family, each move represented a step up. From 1917 until well into the 1930s, the Gold family resided in a series of rented homes on the 2500 and 2600 blocks of South Philip Street, in the extreme southeast corner of the city. A local historian describes the streetscape: "50 twelve-foot-wide rowhouses, 25 to a side, . . . lined every street. Like sardines there were one hundred and fifty neatly stacked two and three story dwellings with cellars in each block."¹⁸ The street's inhabitants were largely Russian and Jewish, bordered by the Irish to the east and the "Neckers" below Oregon Avenue.

Hazardous Business

The 2500 and 2600 blocks of Philip Street would be the geographical hub of young Harry's world. When the Golds moved onto the block, the street was unleveled and unpaved, with irregular mounds of clay making it all but impassable for horse-drawn wagons and the few hand-cranked automobiles in the area.

Oregon Avenue was for all practical purposes the end of the city and a major thoroughfare for freight trains traveling to and from piers along the Delaware River. A latticework of steel track gave a final warning to all who stepped across it that they were leaving the civilized part of the city. Philip Street residents became used to the rattle of dishes in kitchen cupboards when a train passed by, and it was "customary for boys (and men) to hitch rides on the freight cars" and "pry open the box car doors and steal" whatever of value could be carried off. Pilfering coal during the winter was thought by most area residents to be "one of the rights of man."

The train hopping and thievery were hazardous business, thanks to the unexpected jolting stops and "toughness of the railroad detectives." Lacking the physical coordination and nerve to hop the moving box cars, young Harry would stare enviously at the other boys' feats of bravery but

admitted, “I could never quite bring myself to jump for a handrail.” The challenge became all the more daunting when a neighborhood youth would lose his grip and be carried off missing an appendage or two. The sight of Charlie Bilker being brought home while an older boy carried “Charlie’s hand with its bleeding stumps of fingers” and “Louie Horn’s scream as the wheel of a freight passed over his leg” did much to reinforce his mother’s prohibition against playing around with trains.¹⁹

Sometime before 1920, Sam was hired as a cabinetmaker by the Victor Talking Machine Company. Based just across the Delaware River in Camden, New Jersey, the growing company was thought to be a good place to work. Some described it as run in a “benevolently paternalistic fashion”—decent wages, periodic bonuses, free turkeys at Thanksgiving, and other gifts at Christmas.

On February 10, 1917, Celia Gold gave birth to a second son—a “bitter disappointment” for Sam, who very much wanted a girl and was “resentful” for “a very long time.”²⁰ This may be why Harry, then six years old, considered himself his father’s favorite son, even though he saw such favoritism as “unfortunate.” His mother, however, was “rigidly impartial.”

Yussel (Yiddish for Joseph) Gold was named after a grandfather who ordered his children, “When I die and you name a child after me, do not dare to use a Gentile version of my name—it must be *Yussel*.”²¹ Though his friends, teachers, and neighbors all knew him as Joe, his brother and parents never called him anything but Yus or Yussel.

“They were a very strange family”

Although they had much in common with the other residents of Philip Street, the Golds stood out. As a number of former neighbors recalled, “They were just different.” It wasn’t that they exhibited bizarre behavior or a flashy lifestyle, or were threatening in any way; they were just different. Dr. Arthur Coltman, a longtime resident of the neighborhood whose family owned a popular kosher butcher shop, recalls the Golds as “very quiet people. . . . The Gold family didn’t socialize very much. They kept to themselves.”²²

“They were a very strange family,” adds Yetta Silverstein, who grew up on Philip Street and was in the Gold home often. “It was a very somber household. They were sort of stand-offish, certainly not typical of the other Jewish families on the street.” Philip Street in the 1920s, she recalls, was like any other street in the Jewish quarter of South Philadelphia.²³ People gossiped and shared birthdays and other special events;

the streets were narrow asphalt playgrounds. "It was a small street and there were no cars. The kids played ball in the street all day and the mothers were always in each other's houses cooking, baking, sewing, and talking about the latest developments in their lives. Everybody seemed to know everybody's business on the street, but not the Golds."

According to Mrs. Silverstein, "they weren't involved with other people, not even their next door neighbors. Mr. Gold rarely talked and Mrs. Gold was not very friendly with the other women on the street. They spoke English in the house, but they'd also speak a lot of Russian to each other. I didn't always understand what they were saying. They never talked about their lives, didn't socialize, and never seemed to have arguments amongst themselves like other families. They were just very quiet, very strange people. Not your typical Jewish family. They were very poor and lacked a lot. They would talk very secretly and didn't really bother with anybody. They pretty much just kept to themselves."²⁴

"No point in protesting"

Sam Gold taught his older son to work hard without complaining and to persevere despite obstacles. A short, handsome man who continued to sport a stylish mustache, with a stoical demeanor and modest ambitions, he enjoyed working with his hands, appreciated good tools, and appeared most content when turning a block of wood into something attractive and useful. He was said to be a master craftsman and was no doubt quite content sculpting finely detailed wooden cabinets for an array of RCA products (Victor Talking Machines became Radio Corporation of America in the mid-1920s). Yet his employment at the Camden-based company also exposed him to unrelenting anti-Semitism.

Sam's early years at the company were rewarding; if not financially, at least socially. Things took a dramatic turn for the worse after the First World War. After 1920 a "mass influx of Italian workers . . . needed in the changeover from the old craftsman technique to large scale production" resulted in considerably more workplace prejudice.²⁵ The newcomers, Sam's son recalled, "were crudely anti-Semitic," and Gold, "one of the few Jewish workers," became a target. They complained that he worked too fast and made them look bad. They would "badger him," steal his tools, put glue on his planes, chisels, and clothes, and in general made his life miserable. The shop foreman was "fully as intolerant" as his workmen, so there was "no point in protesting." Harry watched his father "suffer uncomplainingly over many years."

For much of his childhood, Harry said, he was unaware of his father's difficulties at work, but over the years he overheard enough conversations between his parents "to construct a dishearteningly accurate picture" of the problem. In the mid-1920s an Irish foreman at RCA, "a man who was more bitterly intolerant than anyone he had yet encountered," told Sam: "You son-of-a-bitch, I'm going to make you quit." He proceeded to assign him to a "specially speeded-up production line" where he was "the only one sanding cabinets" by hand.²⁶

The result was hard to conceal. Each night Sam Gold would return from work "with his fingertips raw and bleeding and with the skin partially rubbed off." Harry and his younger brother would then watch the evening ritual of his mother bathing "the wounded members and then putting ointment on them." Though shaken by his father's daily travail—Harry considered his father's life at RCA a "veritable hell"—he was proud that his father "never quit. . . . Nor did he ever utter one word of complaint." The old man's stoicism was a lesson for his son.²⁷

Despite his skills as a craftsman, impressive work ethic, and general meticulousness, Sam proved a modest wage earner at best. Reluctant to "take advantage of his skills in mathematics and in bookkeeping," he had a history of rejecting well-paid positions and "stubbornly resisted any attempt to get him to improve his spoken English." His "passion for tools" and working with his hands dominated his life. On the rare occasions when there was any extra money in his paycheck, he would make "extravagant purchases of diverse shiny wood-planes, chisels and miter-saws." Celia "would be sorely disappointed" with such expenditures and voice her displeasure, but her husband would reply that the tools would pay for themselves with the extra jobs he could now procure as a handyman. But as Harry admitted, his father "was the world's poorest businessman" and "customarily lost money" doing odd jobs for neighbors.²⁸ Trying to earn extra money by building screened porches for his neighbors, Sam offered cut-rate prices to attract business. According to Harry, his "father lost money on every one of these jobs" yet had to listen to neighbors' "complaints that the cost was exorbitant."

Harry grew up with a similar disregard for business and "lack of veneration for money"—but he had a deep respect for his father's work ethic. Harry admired Sam's commitment to providing for his family despite abuse from co-workers and bosses at RCA and assignments designed to drive him out of the plant. Even when he was laid off, Sam would leave the house "dragging one of his enormously heavy tool chests" at "the fantastic hour of five A.M. so as to be the first in line" for a job seen in a want

ad. Moreover, he would “invariably walk both back and forth from whatever temporary work he happened to have, this sometimes a total distance of seven or eight miles, merely to save fifteen cents carfare.” That extra measure of self-sacrifice would also be passed from father to son.

“*Die Rebbetzin*”

As anyone who grew up on Philip Street between World War I and World War II could tell you (and as John D.M. Hamilton, Harry Gold’s attorney, informed the court many years later): “The dominating influence of the [Gold] home was the mother.”²⁹ Sam Gold may have been the breadwinner, but Celia was the moral, intellectual, and spiritual force within the family. Proud, educated, and opinionated, she was a stern, imposing woman who impressed everyone who entered her orbit. Known by many by the descriptive, if inaccurate, title of “*die Rebbetzin*” (the rabbi’s wife), Mrs. Gold supplemented the family income by giving Hebrew and Yiddish lessons to neighborhood children. Numerous Hebrew schools in the Jewish quarter offered language lessons and bar mitzvah training according to the traditional rote method. Celia charged twenty-five or fifty cents a week to teach children at her kitchen table, where she treated them as individuals and augmented the lessons with Hebrew literature and Jewish folklore, offering sweet baked goods as a reward.³⁰ The result was rapid student progress, a growing clientele, and seven or eight extra dollars a week. Mrs. Gold’s reputation as a Hebrew teacher was “known throughout the entire vicinity.”³¹

She left a deep impression on many of her students; Yetta Silverstein, who spent many afternoons in the Gold kitchen learning to read and speak Hebrew and Yiddish in the mid-1920s, was one of them. “I loved Mrs. Gold,” she says. “I began to feel like a daughter to her. She was an attractive, good-looking woman, with nice skin and pretty curly hair. She was not a housewife like the other mothers on the street and wasn’t baking and cooking all the time. She wasn’t very friendly with the other women. Mr. Gold never talked. He was very quiet and not sociable at all, but I still looked forward to going there after school. Mrs. Gold was a very bright woman, very educated. I loved her.

“Girls weren’t *Bat Mitzvah* in those days so getting such training was something special. Mrs. Gold could be very stern, but she was always very nice to me. She never had a daughter and I think that had something to do with it. She baked cookies for me and was very pleasant. She was a very smart woman; I admired her.”³²

Harry was less enthusiastic about living in a de facto Talmud Torah school. He was proud that his mother, a “natural teacher,” was respected and paid for her intellectual talents, but he “bitterly hated” seeing his home invaded by strangers—children and occasionally adults—every day from four to eight in the evening. He didn’t like eating dinner in the living room while students learned Yiddish and Hebrew in the kitchen. He resented being “deprived” of his mother’s “fascinating and amusing company,” so he turned to “books and sports” for other “sources of entertainment.”³³

Curiously, while Celia Gold earned money fostering the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition, and was constantly reading Bible stories to her children, she herself wasn’t altogether sold on the business of faith. Though Harry would describe his mother as a “deeply religious person,” he recognized she had evolved into a “Social Democrat” and “practicing agnostic”; she “despised hypocrisy” and the “putting on of airs.” It’s fairly clear that Mrs. Gold grew increasingly suspicious of organized religion.³⁴ This was especially the case at the “tiny house of worship at the corner of Philip and Porter Streets,” dominated by “arbitrary administration,” “wealthy bootleggers,” and “businessmen” who “cheated their neighbors.”

Reared in a devout family, appreciative of the “pure beauty of Biblical tales” and well versed in their historical origin, Celia Gold was also aware of the “absurd extremes of the strictly orthodox Hebrew faith” and didn’t bother concealing her doubts from her children.³⁵ Her agnosticism and distaste for established authority may not have interfered with her sons being bar mitzvah, but that ceremonial passage to manhood also concluded their formal participation in the Jewish religion. Never again would they be part of any synagogue activity.

Any resulting spiritual void was filled by Celia’s sobering lectures on the family’s Old World history, aphorisms regarding the human condition, and lessons on the importance of discerning right from wrong. God, she reminded them, looked more favorably upon “worthwhile work that contributed to the welfare of society,” no matter how menial the task, than upon the empty declarations of pompous, self-important, “psalm-singing, breast-beating hypocrites.” Some of the “world’s greatest men,” she told her sons, may have “labored in comparative obscurity,” but by contributing “original thinking and achievement, these toilers had gained . . . a sort of intimacy and awareness of God.”³⁶

Celia stressed to Harry and Yus the “fundamental rights of men” and the constant struggle of the “great masses of people” around the world. “He who does not help his fellow men may not look to God,” she told

them. Harry developed a “sympathy for the underdog.”³⁷ As he admitted years later, “Mom instilled in me the thought that whenever anyone was hurt, anguished, or in trouble, and cried out, I should be there to answer and to extend aid.”³⁸ By all accounts he learned that lesson well.

Another lesson Celia Gold taught her children was self-reliance. Anything that smacked of charity or public handout was to be avoided. Her opposition to charity was so “violent” that she refused the “free baskets of food” and turkeys that were given out at “neighborhood centers at Thanksgiving and Christmas.” More extreme yet was her opposition to Harry attending the University of Pennsylvania’s summer camp at Green Lane during his last two years of grammar school. He was “pretty sickly a good deal of the time as a child,” and his frail constitution was his ticket to the Green Lane summer camp, but his mother needed a good bit of convincing.³⁹ As her son recalled, “it took an awful lot of persuading” and a few “white lies” by Harry and a public school teacher to persuade her that the program “was in no sense a charity affair, before he was permitted to go.”⁴⁰ Gold greatly enjoyed his two summers at the camp in 1923 and 1924. He added seven or eight pounds to his “very puny” frame each summer, developed a “tremendous appetite” for the first time in his life, and met and became inspired by the Penn athletes who were camp counselors.

“Harry would never look you in the eye”

By his own account, Harry’s early years were happy and secure. He was oblivious to the family’s economic struggles and had few cares or wants. Celia regularly told him Bible stories as a toddler, and as he got older she began reading Yiddish folk stories and humorous pieces from the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Harry loved the tales of Sholem Alechim as well as those of B. Kovner in the *Forward*. Taken by the “earthy and wholesome quality of Jewish literature,” he came to see the stories as an accurate depiction of the “people themselves,” not a “strained” or “artificial” presentation of Jewish life. That some of the stories contained an “undertone of derisiveness” only made them more appealing.⁴¹

Outside his parents’ protective cocoon, the world was a threatening place. Apprehension intruded on the most innocent and mundane events. Once, walking with his mother past the schoolyard of Sharswood Elementary School at Second and Wolf streets during recess, six-year-old Harry was unnerved by the hordes of “screaming, yelling, pushing, and boisterous children.” He “shrank against” his mother’s side and asked, “Momma, will I have to go there?”

Gold never understood the origin of this “shyness” that had to be “consciously fought.” He developed an aversion to “exuberant noise” and rowdy crowds. “Meeting people for the first time” was particularly taxing. He attributed this embarrassing trait to “a fear of being exposed to ridicule”; he could never quite figure out what had precipitated it,⁴² but it was all too apparent to others. Yetta Silverstein, who was often in the Gold home for her Hebrew and Yiddish lessons, said, “Harry would never look you in the eye. He was very shy. He would never come close to you and made you feel like you were intruding.” About to graduate from high school, in his own home, and eight years older than his mother’s young student, Harry was the one who would turn away whenever he and the young girl made eye contact.⁴³ “Everyone in the neighborhood,” said Yetta, “knew that he was smart.” Though she “didn’t remember him having any friends” or “ever going out with a girl,” she does recall that “he had a lot of books. You could tell he was very bright.”

Sylvia Weiss and Ted Krakow, both former residents of the neighborhood, have similar memories of the small, shy Gold boy. “He was one of the kids who came in my parents’ corner grocery store,” recalls Mrs. Weiss. “He was a bit smaller than the other boys his age and was very quiet. He stayed to himself most of the time.”⁴⁴ Ted Krakow, who lived one street east of Philip, knew Harry as the *Rebbetzin*’s son. “He was little and heavy, but everyone knew he was very smart,” recalls Krakow.⁴⁵

“He was a real loner,” says Mary Frank, another former neighbor. While other kids were out playing in the street, “Harry always seemed to be involved in some intellectual activity.”⁴⁶

Considering Harry’s obvious discomfort in the company of others, it is not surprising to learn that “he withdrew more and more to himself . . . became a prodigious reader” and evolved into one of those semi-reclusive kids who was more attached to books than to friends.⁴⁷ Devouring his first book at an early age, he admitted to an “ineffable feeling of sadness” when he had completed it—“there was no more to read.”⁴⁸ But there were “other books, many, many others”: *The Adventures of Tom Swift*, *The Rover Boys*, the Frank Merriwell baseball stories, Alexandre Dumas and *The Man in the Iron Mask*, and Ralph Henry Barbour’s tales of schoolboy heroics on the athletic field. His joy as a child, he would recount years later, was to sit in his family’s “capacious, leather-covered, upholstered chair with a number of hard crusts of pumpernickel bread, on which I had rubbed garlic and sprinkled salt, and to munch aromatically away as I read.”⁴⁹

Later, Gold tackled Dickens, Milton, Browning, and Shakespeare.

His intellectual appetite was wide and insatiable: O. Henry's short stories one day, Albert Payson Terhune's "dog stories" of Lassie and Laddie the next, and a Zane Grey western, Jack London adventure, or Conan Doyle mystery the day after. Little Harry's intellectual pursuits may have resonated positively among the intelligentsia of his working-class neighborhood, but they drew sneers and heckling from most children his age. His interest in poetry inspired abuse. "On one occasion," he recalled, "I recited poetry before the assembly in Grammar School and I took a merciless riding from the boys afterwards, got into a couple fights; so, I refused to listen to any of the teachers' entreaties to recite any more poetry. The boys regarded it as very sissyish business."⁵⁰

Gold also developed a passion for movies and theater. He became "enthralled by a drama of any kind"; "the more credible the character portrayal and the more absorbing the story, the better." Though the early film serials of the late 1910s and early 1920s whetted his appetite for the screen adventures of *The Sheik* and *The Sea Hawk*, live theater was where his "real romance" with drama took flight. The rare but exhilarating occasions when his mother would take him to the Arch Street Theatre to see the Yiddish actress Molly Picon, and his seeing *Peter Pan* at the old Broad Street Theatre a few years later, ignited a "passion" for anything dramatic on a stage.⁵¹ Often, Harry admitted, he would exit the theater in a "beatific daze."

He would soon develop a similar interest in music and opera, especially after his father took advantage of his employee discount and "purchased a Victor Talking Machine." Immediately, the Gold family became devoted listeners to everything from "plaintive Yiddish lullabies" to classic Italian operas sung by "Tetrazzini, Caruso, and the famed cantor, Yussell Rosenblatt." Harry wanted to take his growing interest in music to the next level—to learn a musical instrument—but "such was not possible under our [family's] meager circumstances in the early twenties."⁵²

"Fear of disgrace or ridicule"

Young Harry wasn't consumed just by the arts and matters of the mind. He also had an "all-absorbing ardor for sports." This infatuation was clearly hampered by his "small and slight" stature, "sickly" constitution, and timidity. Even in high school, Gold still stood just five feet, three inches tall and weighed between ninety and 110 pounds—not the physical hallmarks of athletic achievement. "I would try to be a participant," he would say years later, "but I was much too slight. They just laughed at me. They wouldn't even let me put on a uniform."⁵³

Despite these handicaps, Gold loved to “play football on the hard asphalt and pavement of Philip Street and the dump lots” nearby; he relished the “hard, smashing thrill of an open-field tackle.” These moments of athletic triumph, however, were few. Gold was considered the “worst player” in the neighborhood, causing teammates “to shudder when they drew [him] as a partner” or team member. Sometimes he was not chosen at all and stood alone on the sidelines. Still, he was a “fanatical” supporter of his high school basketball and football teams, and avidly followed his favorite college and professional players and teams throughout his life—but always as a fan.⁵⁴

If his slight frame and unimpressive athletic ability left him feeling ostracized, his inability to protect himself made him decidedly vulnerable. Gold described his South Philly neighborhood as “a rough one” that endorsed only one method of “proving a boy’s superiority”—“a fight.” He “avoided fights whenever it could be managed,” at other times he took a “shellacking.” Small, timorous, and Jewish, Gold became a target for bullies. Sometimes his family’s naiveté contributed to the mayhem, as when his mother sent him out to play with other children “dressed . . . in a white sailor suit.” Within minutes, not surprisingly, another kid on the block “smeared it with mud and [Harry] ran home in tears.”

Gold avoided physical combat except when the alternative was worse —“to admit cowardice.” He would later wonder if his “reluctance to fight” was due to his long-standing “fear of disgrace or ridicule in front of a crowd.”⁵⁵

The geographic and ethnic landscape only compounded the problem. Though Philip Street was technically in the Jewish quarter, other sizable ethnic communities surrounded it. The Irish were only one block away, on Second Street, and the Neckers were just below the Oregon Avenue train tracks and public dump. Both areas were minefields of religious and ethnic conflict. For Gold, a walk down Stonehouse Lane in the Neck was an “expedition” into the preserve of “some indescribably dirty youngsters” who stoned Gold and his friends, and no doubt were the same ones who committed the sudden “lightning raids” and “brick-throwing, window-smashing forays” against Jewish homes above Oregon Avenue. South Philadelphia Jews liked to believe they too “had a rough crowd” and “could hold their own” with their intimidating neighbors, but one thing was clear—you “never walked alone” through the Neck.⁵⁶ “You didn’t go down there unless you had to,” recalls Ted Krakow, who lived on American Street, just north of Oregon Avenue. “They’d beat the hell out of you. Jews were not welcome down there.”⁵⁷

Confrontations closer to home could be just as troubling. A snowball

fight with the Catholic kids from Mount Carmel Parochial School, at Third and Wolf, left Gold with a ringing head for two days when one of the snowballs held a concealed rock.⁵⁸

The large and growing Italian community to the west presented its own problems. Borrowing books from the public library at Broad and Porter streets, well over a mile from his home, could be risky. At the age of twelve, Gold was “badly beaten by a group of fifteen Gentile boys at 12th and Shunk Streets while returning from the library.”

“From that time on,” Gold would write later, his father—“with his not too unwilling agreement”—“insisted on convoying Harry to the library regularly” on Saturday nights, patiently waiting outside while his son chose books. Sam Gold’s interest in protecting his son’s welfare was admirable, but for Harry the paternal escort service was the height of humiliation. He “took pains to conceal it from the rest of the boys” in the neighborhood. Harry faced a real quandary: either accept the stigma of a parent providing protection on his journeys through South Philadelphia or do without a bodyguard and risk a pummeling by “lurking gangs.”⁵⁹ For two long, humiliating years, Harry accepted his father as a shield.⁶⁰

The minor but almost daily indignities, along with the more serious confrontations such as those at Mount Carmel and the Broad Street library—not to mention his father’s very troubling affairs with bigoted co-workers—left Gold with “tremendous resentment” and an “overwhelming desire to do something active” to fight prejudice. He hoped that one day he’d discover some means “on a much wider and [more] effective scale than by smashing an individual anti-Semite in the face.”⁶¹

Though often the target of bullies and anti-Semites, Gold bought into many of his neighborhood’s customs and attitudes. One of the more important and universal principles “was the doctrine that a self-respecting man never became a squealer” or “tattler to the police or cops.” Law enforcement officers were considered “corrupt hoodlums, takers of bribes, and sadists” who beat up prisoners and anyone else they decided to lean on. “One really had to live where I did,” said Gold, “to fully appreciate the bitter venom and hatred with which a stool pigeon was regarded.”⁶² Upon his arrest many years later, this tenet of noncooperation with authorities proved initially troubling, but eventually—to his surprise—easy to rationalize away.

“Please make me pass, Harry”

His mother’s deep convictions and directives still guided Harry in everything from his beneficent outlook toward his fellow man to his extreme

chivalry regarding the opposite sex. The tension between maternal guidance and environmental pressures led to some rather interesting predicaments.

One instance was his penchant for tutoring schoolchildren in the neighborhood. Few were turned away, and it was commonplace for Harry to sit in the homes of other children and assist them with their schoolwork. He occasionally did more than just tutor. Early on, Gold realized he “had the happy faculty of being able to write the English compositions and themes” assigned by his various teachers. It wasn’t long before other children asked him to write theirs as well. Gold “happily agreed.”⁶³

Soon, however, he was “expending all of [his] creative reserve and efforts in doing as many as four or five in one night for other students” and then realizing near midnight that he had “run dry” of ideas and had not begun his own composition. All too frequently Gold would fall asleep, then “stealthily awake” before dawn and “patch together” his own assignment. Never was payment offered or requested for his ghostwriting services. Though he claimed that these services “bored and exasperated” him, he, like his mother, did “enjoy helping people.”

As an academic soft touch, Gold was susceptible to some brazen requests. Late in his career at Southern High, for example, his English class was “given a written test based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.” The instructor, Dr. Farbish, “a holy terror,” gave them twenty-five questions requiring one- to three-word answers. The test was designed to provide a lifeline for the many students flunking the course. “Pass this and I’ll let you get by” was the teacher’s challenge. Gold quickly shot through the quiz but was startled by Dr. Farbish’s request that he “help him . . . by doing the grading” that very night. Gold dutifully agreed, but another student “witnessed the transfer of exam sheets” and he was soon “besieged by a group of boys all pleading, ‘Please make me pass, Harry.’”

Gold went home and “sat up till after 5 AM filling in missing answers, erased the wrong ones and supplied the correct words, and even went so far as to fake the some twenty-five different varieties of handwriting.” By the time he “fell wearily into bed, everyone had passed, every last boy.” In what he called a “twisted quirk of expiation,” Gold “lowered his own mark a trifle.”

Dr. Farbish’s reaction on seeing the grades would trouble Gold for years. “The class did very well, did they not, Harry?” he said. Then he turned his back without waiting for an answer and walked away. For decades, Gold felt “the gentle sarcasm of his teacher’s remark” and believed he owed him an apology for acting so “shamefully.” It wasn’t often

that his mother's firm dictates about honesty and trustworthiness fell victim to the pressures of the street.⁶⁴

A "Frank Merriwell complex"

The Farbish incident presented Gold with what he called a "real stumbling block." "Why," he asked himself many times, "had I done this for a group of stupid, lazy dolts to who I had no responsibility and no allegiance?"⁶⁵ The answer was unavoidable: "gullibility and naiveté." Combined with his "very powerful impulse" to trust in the intrinsic goodness of people (*gemütlichkeit*) and his strong desire to please, they made for a potent brew of emotions that did not always serve Harry well. "I never stopped being astounded," he would one day write, "upon discovering that the very person who smiled and spoke to me kindly, had nasty, hidden ulterior motives." Though he considered such people "twisted," he "could not get angry" with them. He pitied them, for "they were missing so much of the fun of liking others."⁶⁶ Even though he was sometimes taken advantage of, the "desire to help others," according to his attorney, would be "the dominant characteristic of Harry Gold's later life."⁶⁷

Some of these impulses contributed to Gold's "extravagantly chivalrous notions regarding girls." His "mom's teaching that women must be respected and . . . reading Zane Grey and Frank Merriwell" led to a highly inflated view of women and a firm belief in "romantic love." At an early age he was "convinced that if a boy waited long enough, the one he loved would come along." For Gold, "all girls were good and gentle creatures, made specifically for men to cherish and protect."

Years later, Gold realized that these notions did not square with reality. "I was much perturbed to discover that many of the feminine gender were full of malice and meanness, and would lie more often than tell the truth." Until he grasped this sobering truth, however, Gold honored the opposite sex and "always" gave up his seat "on a trolley car" to a woman. In fact, he thought himself "probably the last male in Philadelphia to stop doing so."⁶⁸

Women were not the only ones to scuttle Gold's storybook notions. His propensity to believe in the innate goodness of people could also be rudely shaken by his heroes—athletes. Gold admitted to growing up with a "Frank Merriwell complex"—an adoration of accomplished athletes, who in addition to their physical prowess exemplified honesty and fair play. It came as a "crushing shock" to learn that not every athletic hero was a paragon of virtue.⁶⁹ On hearing one of his "great baseball heroes, Al Simmons," unload "a selection of curse words" on a lowly shoeshine

boy, “the illusion of a Lancelot . . . a man pure in heart and without blemish of any kind,” was quickly and painfully “shattered.”⁷⁰

Such idealistic notions were repeatedly crushed. Gold’s impulse to trust in people seemed boundless. A healthy suspicion regarding motives and a judicious assessment of credibility—especially when someone was asking him to do something—were resources he never seemed to acquire.

A “fixation . . . so overpowering”

Curiously, though he was without caution in his interpersonal dealings, Harry was quite the opposite in his correspondence and academic work. A fervent list maker, he also rewrote letters, messages, and work assignments—not once or twice but many times. The slightest mistake required another draft. Every note, every personal letter, every report had to be pristine. Gold’s “ever-present drive for perfection in a task undertaken” was irresistible. “This fetish of discarding a not-quite-up-to-snuff page troubled” him throughout his academic and professional life, and “remnants of this curious twist,” as he referred to it, remained with him until his death.⁷¹ Today, of course, we recognize such behavior as a symptom of an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Gold’s list making and rewriting are fairly typical of the disorder.⁷²

In addition to these compulsions, Gold also experienced “unwelcome distressing thoughts and mental images.” The most troubling was an intense and recurring fear of never being gainfully employed: “Starting at the age of about twelve, I began to fret about my future—in what way would I earn a living, to what sort of work would I be adapted?” Over time, the fear increased, “ceaselessly digging away” at him. “Perhaps I would never actually be able to find a job,” he wrote, “maybe no one would want to hire me.” Gold admitted that “this fixation became so overpowering” that he “would cry,” and his father would have to console him.⁷³

This fear was aggravated by his very real inability to find and hold employment during his teenage years. His first job as a “candy-butcher” at the old Broad Street Theatre lasted one performance because he “only sold one box” of candy: he was “too frightened to call out his wares between acts.”⁷⁴ As a fourteen-year-old, Gold tried selling newspapers like most other boys in the neighborhood, but when assigned a “lonely street corner in far Eastwick”—a section of Southwest Philadelphia—he “sold so few papers” that he was “told not to return.” Frightened by reports of neighborhood gangs setting upon outsiders, Gold admitted to being relieved he had been fired.

Even before the Depression, Gold was all too familiar with the difficulty of finding a job. During summers when others were being hired as “errand boys,” he made the “round of small shops and wholesale houses in the area of Market, Arch, and Vine streets” but “never as much as got a nibble.” Exhausted and depressed from these failures, he would go home “to find solace in Ralph Henry Barbour, Dumas or James Oliver Curwood—plus a liberal supply of mom’s cookies.”⁷⁵

“I lose all tolerance”

In his solitary existence, beset by insecurities, Gold developed a fast attachment to any who offered their friendship. He would later refer to his “almost puppy-like eagerness to please,” and others who came to know him would comment on the same quality. Once he became “fond of a particular person,” he would “literally, do anything for him.”⁷⁶

As he entered his teens, Gold did begin to open up and develop some serious friendships. And he was proud of them—not surprising, considering that most of his youth had been spent at his mother’s side with a wide array of books for companions. Finally “I was one of a very closely bound group of boys, the gang.”⁷⁷

Abe Sklar “was the leader.” “Small and wiry,” he was the “best fighter in the group,” according to Gold, and someone whose “counsel always seemed so sensible.” Danny Gussick “was the black sheep” of the group, whose father, “a professional gambler,” spent more time in New York than in Philadelphia. Izzy Lieberman “was the oldest of eleven children” and left school at an early age to help support his family. “His father was tubercular” and often confined to a sanatorium. Frank Kessler was the “steady-going and solid sort, both mentally and physically,” the one whom Harry looked upon as a “reassuring” confidant and whose name he would appropriate when working as a secret agent.⁷⁸

Gold relished being part of his own group of boys. “To say we were close is an understatement,” he wrote years later, “for we went everywhere together, played together, and were constantly in one another’s homes.” It was this group of friends in December 1926, when Gold turned sixteen, who unexpectedly came to his home with gifts—a matching tie and handkerchief, his favorite chocolate-covered cherries, and tickets to a show at the Earle Theatre. These were his first birthday presents from anyone other than his parents. Many years later, Gold would fondly declare, “I shall never forget it.”⁷⁹

Gold would make other friends during these years, such as Leon Colt-

man, Arthur's brother and the bright son of the local kosher butcher, "from the only really comfortably-off family in our street," and Sammy Haftel, a stocky youngster "who could fight like a demon" and "taught others to respect him"—despite the abuse he took because his father was a "drunkard" and his mother worked to support the family. Gold treasured these friendships all his life and was saddened "whatever drifting away occurred" as some of the boys married and he himself went to college.⁸⁰

Though these relationships were slow to emerge, Gold cherished them all, extended himself far beyond the norm when his friends were in need, and "never consciously, except for brief outbursts, hated anyone for long." But there was "one burning exception" to his "powerful impulse" to like and respect people: Fascists.

For Gold, Fascism was a "creed synonymous with that ages-old horror, anti-Semitism. Here I lose all tolerance," he would write. From his early experiences fending off bigoted youth, his father's recurring abuse at the Victor Talking Machine plant, and the increasing reports of religious and political repression in Germany, "it was obvious that there could be no quarter in the fight against anti-Semitism, and no true peace until it was vanquished, no, not beaten, but utterly obliterated."⁸¹

But as he approached his senior year, what preoccupied Gold was getting a job after high school. He longed to contribute to the household—and if the job could have an element of science or chemistry to it, so much the better. By his mid-teens Gold had developed a keen interest in chemistry. He and Sammy Haftel would often walk to the Center City showrooms of various chemical companies to admire the sophisticated equipment, and when savings allowed, head toward the South Street company warehouses to "purchase a variety of elementary laboratory glassware and chemicals." "From his first high school chemistry course," Gold wrote, "the bond had been sealed."⁸²

But for a poor Jewish boy with no work history, a college education and a professional career as a chemist were distant dreams. His first goal was daunting enough—landing a job.

A Debt Repaid

In August 1928, Governor Alfred E. Smith became the Democratic Party's candidate for president of the United States; Walt Disney introduced his most popular animated character, Mickey Mouse; and the New York Yankees were on their way to winning another World Series. In Paris, the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact was signed by fifteen nations in an effort to outlaw aggressive warfare. In Philadelphia, Harry Gold was getting ready to graduate from high school.

Though he would not receive his diploma from South Philadelphia High School until February 1929, Gold completed his required course work and left school in August.¹ Unable to find a steady summer job, he had stayed in school for two consecutive summers and graduated a half-year ahead of schedule, ranked third in a class of 160.²

Soon after graduation, an acquaintance of his father came forward with a job offer. Gold was hired by "Giftcrafters, a woodworking firm in the Kensington section of the city whose principal product was ship models." He had grown up watching his father repair and refinish furniture in the basement and build enclosed porches for neighbors on Philip Street. Woodworking never became a passion for Harry, but it was a job, and the \$10 a week he was paid at the plant was the first steady money he ever earned. He guided sanding machines, assembled models with

glue and nails, and became proficient with an array of chisels. The grueling ten-hour days and six-day weeks gave him a new skill, toughened hands, and a meager but growing bank account.³ At least temporarily, Giftcrafters put a stop to Gold's recurring panic that he would never land a job that paid a regular wage.

"Forty cents an hour for seven days a week"

Gold had no intention of following his father into a career in woodworking. His father's low pay and constantly bruised and bloody fingers—and vile treatment at the hands of anti-Semitic co-workers—inspired Harry to aim higher. If he was going to earn money with his hands, he'd prefer to be handling chemicals and test tubes in a laboratory. He kept his eyes open for new opportunities, and in December 1928 applied for a position with the Pennsylvania Sugar Company, a large refinery plant along the banks of the Delaware River in the Fishtown section of the city.

One of the largest sugar refineries in the world, with sales of more than \$31 million and employing almost eleven hundred Philadelphians, Pennsylvania Sugar had been overhauled from a "small, wobbly company" in 1912 into a serious and growing concern. Its three subsidiaries, Pennsylvania Alcohol Corporation, Siboney Distilling Corporation, and the Franco-American Chemical Corporation, were each formidable economic operations that produced everything from Quaker brand alcohol and antifreeze to solvents, paints, lacquers, and rum.⁴

Gold was given an entry level job cleaning spittoons, emptying waste receptacles, and washing dirty equipment, but the facility had a chemistry lab where some significant science was undertaken. Moreover, he was in the presence of college-educated men, some with advanced degrees, who, as Gold's lawyers would say many years later, were "putting into daily practice the sciences in which he was so desperately interested . . . and bringing into commercial reality those things which before had been but text book theories . . . carried out in the school room laboratory."⁵ Gold believed he was getting closer to his goal of becoming a man of science.

In addition, he was making money, "forty cents an hour for seven days a week, twelve hours a day." That added up to \$33.60 per week, occasionally \$40 with overtime, princely sums compared with his wages at Giftcrafters. It contributed mightily to the family's modest income.⁶ Gold dutifully brought each check home to his mother, who took a portion for the household, gave her son some spending and transportation money,

and put the rest into a bank account she had opened for him. His savings grew quickly—with rarely a day off, he had no time to spend it. But even if he had had the time, the savings would have remained untouched; the family agreed that the money was for Harry's college education.

Gold soaked up as much knowledge as he could, spending more time than he was supposed to in the facility's chemistry lab, and carefully observing the scientists practicing their craft. His keen interest was noted by Dr. Gustave T. Reich, the Pennsylvania Sugar Company's lead researcher. After only six months on the job, the precocious teenager was promoted to "laboratory assistant." Although his pay wasn't increased much, that mattered little; he was no longer cleaning out spittoons but assisting real chemists in serious projects.

"An extreme state of exhaustion"

Gold was also enjoying newfound economic security. That his wages seemed to have little impact on his material possessions or social life bothered him not one bit. "I simply had no time whatsoever to go out" and spend it, he would recall years later of his quickly accumulating savings.⁷ By working practically every day of the week and spending almost nothing, Gold managed to save approximately \$2,400 by September 1930, when he left the Pennsylvania Sugar Company to enter the University of Pennsylvania.⁸ He was now realizing another part of his dream: he had become a college man. Though conscientious and hard working, he was not a brilliant student. He embarked on an ambitious schedule of science, math, and literature courses.⁹ It was "all I could do to keep up with my college studies," he later admitted, but he still made time to tutor former high school friends and Sugar Company colleagues who needed help with their studies.¹⁰

In addition to the demanding course work, Gold attempted to realize another of his dreams—to become an athlete on a college team. Though passionate about sports, he had never distinguished himself on any athletic field. Recognizing his limitations, he steered clear of contact sports and went out for Penn's freshman cross-country team.

Inspired by his vivid recollection of Frank Merriwell's and Ralph Henry Barbour's stories and by the more recent success of the Philadelphia Athletics—winners of the 1929 and 1930 World Series—Gold pushed himself through the long mileage required of competitive distance runners.¹¹ The rigorous training sessions, combined with his heavy academic load, kept him in "an extreme state of exhaustion" for much of

his freshman year. Hindered both by his unimpressive physical gifts and by his lack of high school experience, he had an uphill climb to make the team. A serious ankle sprain just before a big meet in New York sidelined him for several weeks.¹² The injury basically ended his aspirations as a college runner, and he would never again attempt to earn a position on a competitive athletic team.¹³

Athletic disappointment and his mediocre classroom record were soon eclipsed by graver concerns. It was the onset of the Great Depression. Like millions of households across America, the Golds were gradually enveloped in an all-consuming financial struggle.

“The day of reckoning had arrived”

The loss of Harry's weekly wage had hurt, and Celia Gold was occasionally forced to dip into his savings to put food on the table and pay creditors. He gave his mother permission to do as she saw fit. The rent often went unpaid. The family's dilemma grew worse when Sam Gold was laid off from RCA in 1931. It was not the first time the head of the Gold household had been thrown out of work, but this time it was different. The nation was in the midst of a devastating and worsening depression, work was hard or impossible to come by, and the unpaid bills were piling up rapidly.

Sam went out each morning, lugging his heavy toolbox, searching for any kind of work, but he returned home at the end of each day exhausted and penniless. One day Celia, a proud woman unalterably opposed to charity, was devastated to discover him selling apples on a city street corner.

Though preoccupied with his coursework, Harry was aware of the economic conditions affecting the country as well as his family. Yet he may not have felt the full impact until he arrived home one afternoon to discover “a stranger, a city constable, about to take the furniture from the home under a writ” for unpaid rent. It was then that he realized they were practically penniless.¹⁴

“The day of reckoning had arrived,” and Harry did not shirk his responsibility.¹⁵ His bank account depleted, “there was but one source from which funds were available. This was the return of the unearned portion of his tuition for the second semester which had been paid in advance.”¹⁶ Though it had been his great dream to attain a college degree and proclaim himself a certified chemist, his family came first. Gold “voluntarily withdrew” from the second semester of his second year at Penn on March

12, 1932. His unselfish act would not only provide the immediate funds for his family; he would now replace his father as the family's chief breadwinner. The next morning he went to his former boss at the Pennsylvania Sugar Company and asked to be rehired.

The company was cutting back its workforce, but Gold was lucky enough to regain a position. Because of across-the-board pay cuts, his wages were significantly lower, and he would be working not in the laboratory but in the distillery plant. His new assignments required more muscle than intellect and proved far less satisfying than lab work. Nevertheless, it was a paycheck, and the Gold household desperately needed it.

“Eagerness to please”

Once his ten- or twelve-hour workdays were over, Gold spent much of his free time assisting co-workers and neighbors with their academic pursuits. He never requested compensation, and refused it on the rare occasions when it was offered. Moreover, these tutoring sessions invariably took place at the home of the student, greatly increasing Harry's expenditure of time and his transportation costs. He seemed oblivious to such concerns. Since grade school, he had helped others in their studies. As his lawyer would say many years later, “these were not casual instances of some friend occasionally helping another, but rather a pattern of conduct in a man who wanted to be of assistance to those who needed help.”¹⁷

Harry also lent money to those in need. Though his generosity had manifested itself during his childhood and adolescence, it took flight now that he was earning a salary while surrounded by cash-strapped co-workers. “Gold made loans to these people,” his lawyer recalled, “irrespective of any prior acquaintance and despite the fact his own family was probably in need as much as those to whom he advanced money.”¹⁸ What's worse, “he did this when the money was not available to him and in order to obtain it he often borrowed money at usurious rates in order that he might make advances to those who were in need.” He rarely asked for the money back. He liked and trusted people, but his “gullibility” often led to problems.¹⁹ In short, he was an easy touch with a seemingly unending line of applicants.²⁰ Gold knew that these loans were “foolish disbursements,” but his “eagerness to please” generally overwhelmed his financial prudence.²¹

As the economy worsened, Harry and his co-workers fretted about their job security, discussed what needed to be done to right the nation,

and threw out the names of politicians who could do a better job than President Hoover. Gold was overheard one day telling some pipe fitters that Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas was a “great man.” A company superintendent “rebuked” him and warned that there was to be “no further talk of socialism in the plant.” Gold complied, but the economic crisis, the threat of additional layoffs, and the lecture from a superior only made him more “obdurate.”²²

Though sympathetic to the Socialist Party’s standard bearer and principles, Gold was far from an ideologue or political activist. His politics didn’t go much beyond an amorphous “theory of social cooperation.” He claimed to be “horrified” and “incredulous” on learning that Davey Zion, a neighborhood friend, had proclaimed himself a Communist and was now giving speeches and handing out party literature at Mifflin Park. Though others defended his friend’s actions, Gold admitted to “feeling . . . revulsion.” For Gold, “Bolshevism or communism was just a name for a wild and vaguely defined phenomenon going on in an 18th century land thousands of miles away.”²³

Politics was a luxury Harry had little time for. With Sam still out of work, the national economy in shambles, his younger brother Yus just entering high school, and his mother struggling to keep food on the table, Harry’s modest salary was all that separated them from starvation or eviction. He worked six or seven days a week and could only dream of the day when things would get better and he could return to Penn.

Things were to grow much worse.

In December 1932, just ten days before Christmas, Gold and twenty-five other workers received layoff notices and were told that they had little “hope of being reemployed in the reasonably near future.” This was a devastating blow to the entire Gold household, especially Celia. Her dutiful son wasted little time in searching for a new job, but Philadelphia was not a cornucopia of economic opportunity.

“No one had money”

The early years of the Depression in Philadelphia witnessed considerable damage. Unemployment was soaring, and the city’s economy was on the verge of collapse. More than fifty banking institutions were forced to close because of “overextended resources, granting credit on insufficient security,” and a host of other misguided financial practices. Unemployment councils and shantytowns full of newly homeless men were springing up. City police stations, normally the last refuge of the homeless, were

now taking in hundreds of men a night who had nowhere else to turn. In 1932 alone, citywide mortgage foreclosures exceeded nineteen thousand. On one residential street, “thirty-six out of sixty houses were repossessed for debt.” The prospect of a similar fate befalling his family frightened Gold tremendously. He needed to find employment quickly, but where in Philadelphia in 1933 did someone find work? Almost 12 percent of white Philadelphians and 16 percent of blacks were unemployed. Foreign-born whites like Gold fared worst of all: 20 percent were jobless.²⁴ In densely populated South Philadelphia the numbers were even gloomier, “almost one in three workers was out of a job.”²⁵ With his family desperately depending on him, twenty-two-year-old Harry Gold faced a daunting challenge.

Celia painfully decided to return the family’s “new parlor suite”—their first in sixteen years—to Lit Brothers Department Store. The \$50 refund was “vital and loomed so large” to the Gold family’s economic survival.²⁶ The Golds were not alone in their embarrassment; returning merchandise or, worse, having it repossessed had become commonplace.²⁷ “Playing eviction in the city’s streets” became a new game among children.²⁸

“No one had money, it was a terrible time,” says Ted Krakow, whose older brother Simon was a friend of Joe Gold’s. “We had to beat the sheriff and the constable. They’d come to our house and said if we didn’t pay the rent they were going to take the furniture and then put us out on the street.” Krakow remembers those emotional times when his family “was on the run.” “When we didn’t have money to pay the rent, my father would get a horse and wagon, and move us during the night to another house. It happened two or three times.”²⁹

Sam and Harry Gold looked for work each morning, Sam at the “fantastic hour of 5 a.m. so as to be first in line” for a possible job—but both returned to Philip Street in the evening dejected and voicing increasing despair. Businesses were laying off employees or folding, and furniture cluttered many sidewalks as families were evicted from their homes. With nothing to show for his daily tours of riverfront industrial sites, Kensington textile mills, and Center City businesses, Gold found his teenage nightmares coming back with a vengeance.

His anxiety was evident to his friends. Ferdinand Heller, a research chemist at the Pennsylvania Sugar Company with strong left-wing tendencies, suggested that Harry try something dramatic—he encouraged Gold to leave America and “take [his] family to the Birobidzhan area of the Soviet Russia.”³⁰

Nestled in a sparsely populated stretch of wilderness the size of Texas between the Bira, Bidzhan, and Amur rivers along the Sino-Soviet border some five thousand miles east of Moscow, Birobidzhan was being promoted as a “national homeland of Soviet Jewry.” It would be officially proclaimed the Jewish Autonomous Region (J.A.R.) in May 1934.³¹ Despite absent infrastructure, a “harsh climate,” and a reputation as “an extremely unattractive territory,” Birobidzhan had its advocates, and Jews from all over the world—many captivated by the notion of a homeland of their own—relocated there.³² Life was fraught with difficulties—some considered the wilderness settlement’s obstacles nothing short of “catastrophic”—and Jews were a small minority of the region’s inhabitants; yet many of the Jewish faith were drawn to the idea, if not the area itself.³³

Jews from Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City heard the call. “My parents were from Russia and seriously considering going back there during the heart of the Depression,” recalled Aaron Libson. “Their doors were open after the revolution. There was potential for a model state, a secular Jewish state, a worker’s state where capitalism would be harnessed and life’s harshness would be ended. Birobidzhan was definitely known and attractive to Jews.”³⁴

Doris Kaplan was eleven years old in 1931 when her father came home from work one day and told the family, “We’re going to Russia.” For her parents, says Kaplan, “Birobidzhan promised a better life—each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”³⁵ The Kaplans made the exhausting eleven-day trip from New York to Bremen, to Helsinki, to Leningrad and Moscow, and then the long overland journey on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to a lush but remote agricultural community in the middle of nowhere. “It was like going to the country,” recalls Kaplan, but this was the real country. She remembers “living in tents, no schools, and great deprivation, but everybody was Jewish and believed in a Socialist system of government.” She also remembers “meeting people from France, Argentina, England, Canada.”³⁶

Life in the grand experiment was difficult, and the promise of a better existence was not always realized. Many believe Birobidzhan “was doomed to failure” from the very beginning.³⁷ “The poor soil, heavy rains during July and August, when the crop was about to ripen, hordes of mosquitoes and flies, and a very cold winter with little snow were hard on settlers.” Predictably, many escaped to more civilized realms or made the disappointing trek back home. Kaplan and her mother departed for Moscow after a few months.³⁸ Her father joined them the following year. Eventually they would return to America.

Gold had heard of the Birobidzhan experiment and knew of its appeal to some Russian Jews, but for him Fred Heller's well-meaning suggestion was "nonsense."³⁹ He and his father were out of work and times were hard, but Gold was an American. He had no desire to go anywhere else, and certainly not to the wilds of Siberia. It was just a "hair brained idea" by a well-intentioned friend. "I was not even a communist sympathizer," recalled Gold, or an especially observant Jew.⁴⁰ "As bad as things were here," he would subsequently write, "I still considered this my home and liked it very much."

But along with his friends, his familiar Jewish neighborhood, and the American culture he so voraciously imbibed came the dreaded prospect of economic ruin and the "disgraceful specter and the deep ignominy of charity." Though charity cases were growing ever more common on Philip Street and throughout the city, Gold knew his mother's antipathy for handouts.

Yet the Golds were squarely facing economic ruin. They were about to become a charity case—something Harry's mother was "violently against." He had "looked for work frantically" since being laid off, but weeks had passed, it was late February 1933, and bills were going unpaid. The prospect of sheriff's deputies appearing at the front door with an eviction notice was becoming a daily threat.

"Gold must arrive tonight"

One day his friend Fred Heller excitedly came over to his house after work. He was "jubilant"—he had found a job for Gold. Heller explained, "Tom Black, a friend and a former classmate of his at Penn State, was leaving his job at the Holbrook Manufacturing Co., a soap firm in Jersey City, and could possibly arrange for [Gold] to take his place."⁴¹ Black, according to Heller, was taking "a better position at the National Oil Products Co. in Harrison, New Jersey," and the Holbrook outfit would need a replacement. If Gold was interested, Black advised him to give the job serious consideration, since such opportunities were in short supply.

Harry had not taken up his friend's previous suggestion regarding a move to Birobidzhan, but Heller's present announcement was considerably more appealing. The Holbrook opportunity, however, would be as life-altering as relocating to Siberia. It would stave off homelessness for his family, but it would also result in a series of decisions that would precipitate the "crime of the century" and make the name of Harry Gold one of the most reviled in postwar America.⁴²

At the time, the only drawback to the Holbrook job was its location—in Jersey City. Besides two summer camp experiences as a child, Gold had never lived away from home. But he was in his twenties and the family breadwinner. Circumstances demanded he step up to the plate.

About a week later, a knock on the door notified Gold that there was a phone call for him at Coltman's Kosher Butcher Shop on Philip Street. It was Heller, informing him that he had just received a telegram from Black. The message said, "Gold must arrive tonight" if he wanted the job. Harry and his mother quickly packed the flimsy cardboard suitcase he had last used for summer camp a decade earlier. He "borrowed \$6 from Frank Kessler as well as a jacket which closely matched [his] pants . . . and was bundled off on a Greyhound bus" for North Jersey.⁴³

"Capitalism was doomed"

Gold arrived in a snowy Jersey City well after midnight and eventually found his way to Corbin Avenue, where Black shared an apartment with Ernie Segressemann. "Tom was waiting for me in the hallway downstairs," Gold would report years later. Black had a "huge, friendly grin in that freckled face crowned with those untamed reddish curls and bear like grip of his hand."⁴⁴ The two men stayed up all night discussing soap chemistry, politics, and some "complicating circumstances" concerning the job.⁴⁵

The Holbrook operation was "owned by two venerable and gentlemanly brothers, Franklin and Stanton Smith," but run by a superintendent named MacIntosh who, Black said, was "very anti-Semitic and would never consent to hiring a Jew." To get around this impediment, Black "concocted a jumbled story," arguing that although the name Gold sounded Jewish, Harry was to say that his grandfather had converted when he married a Gentile girl many years earlier.⁴⁶

Adding to the "confusing mess" was Black's announcement that Heller had sent Gold to "Jersey City because as a Socialist he was a likely recruit to the more militant organization," the Communist Party. That night Gold "was subjected to a steady barrage of facts to prove that capitalism was doomed . . . in the United States and that the only country to which the working man owed allegiance was the Soviet Union and that the only reasonable way of life was communism." Both the fictitious family history and the all-night propaganda session seemed a bit ridiculous to Gold, but good jobs were hard to come by, especially ones where he would be a company's "chief chemist."⁴⁷