Prejudice and Me:
A Sociological Memoir

Fred L. Pincus

Memoir

“My parents are communists.”
“I hate Mexicans.”

These two secrets permeated my childhood years in the Boyle Heights community of East Los Angeles during the late 1940s. The first secret, I couldn’t share with most of my friends and classmates. The second, I couldn’t share with my parents. Both weighed me down.

Both Mom and Dad were active members of the Communist Party during the McCarthy years of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Some of their friends—one of whom was a favorite teacher of mine—were fired because of their Party membership. A few others served jail sentences for their political beliefs. During the same period, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a Jewish couple from New York, were executed in 1953 for allegedly conspiring to give atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. Worldwide protests failed to stop the execution.

My paternal grandfather, who lived with us, and my maternal grandparents, who lived in the next house, were also communists. They were part of the secular Jewish movement of the early twentieth century that emerged from labor union struggles of Eastern European immigrants. Jewish-identified, in terms of culture and history, they were all atheist in terms of religion. The struggle for racial equality, a worldview supported
by my family members, was always a major issue in the Communist Party’s working class organizing and was a common topic of conversation in our house.

A thin cloud of fear cast a shadow throughout my childhood. Mom and Dad told my sister, Laurie, and I that we could not tell our friends and classmates about their Communist Party membership. *Would Mom or Dad be arrested or killed? Would I inadvertently say something that would get them into trouble? What would happen to me if they weren’t around?* These fears dominated my thoughts as a child.

When I was seven, for example, I was playing in our living room while the front door was open and the screen door latched. I heard a knock on the door and saw two men in dark suits and hats. Before I could stand up and ask them what they wanted, my mother rushed past me and practically snarled at the two men.

“What do you want?” she said.

“We’re from the FBI,” one of them said as they flashed their badges. “We’d like to talk with you.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” she said firmly and slammed the door in their faces. When she turned toward us, her face said that she was furious.

“What’s wrong?” I said. “Why did you slam the door on those men?”

“They were from the FBI,” she said. “That’s how you deal with the FBI.”

“What’s the FBI?” I asked. “They had badges.”

“They are like the police and they are trying to harass us,” she said.

“But, why? What did we do?”

“They don’t like communists.”

“Why not?”

After a few seconds, she said, “They don’t believe in equality between Negroes and whites like we do. They also don’t respect the rights of workers.”

“But they had badges.”

“It’s ok now. Don’t worry. Go back to your game,” and she left the room.

*The FBI men knew we were communists. How did they know? Who told them? Mom is usually a very polite person but she slammed the door on them. Are they mad? Will they do something to hurt us? Maybe it would be better if we weren’t communists. No secrets. No FBI visits. No threats from the president. If only we could be just like everyone else.*