

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007
Jeff Kisseloff, (independent scholar)

JEFF KISSELOFF: I've got bad lungs that are made worse by stress. The fact that I'm speaking publicly about the Hiss Case for the first time after nearly thirty years of being involved with the case probably won't make matters any easier, so forgive me if my voice goes in and out. To start, I want to address an accusation aimed at me by Ron Radosh on the New Republic website where he stated that, "Jeffrey Kisseloff runs the fanatical pro-Hiss website." I resent that inaccuracy. I've never been known as Jeffrey in my whole life.

I'm one of the few people speaking at this conference who knew Alger Hiss well. Over the years, I've been asked how I could be objective on the case considering our relationship and the fact that I've spent so many years laboring to clear his name.

My answer has always been a simple one: I'm a journalist. I've applied those skills to my work on the case, whatever the outcome. The fact is that it's always been clear to me that when the evidence was analyzed objectively all signs pointed to Hiss's innocence. If they hadn't, I wouldn't be here saying that they did. When I went to work for Alger as an undergraduate in 1976, I was determined to ask him as many questions as possible about the allegations against him. Whenever I could, I checked his responses against the defense files or the trial record, and I decided if one of his answers didn't check out, I'd leave. Very simple. I had no interest in working for a liar. Our website, www.algerhiss.com, continues that tradition of asking questions. If the answers turn out to be unpleasant truths, so be it, but in the time I've

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been working on this case, I've yet to find a single instance where Alger was deliberately less than truthful with me or anyone else, and I've never left.

Now by the time we were done getting new files in the 1970s, they totaled around 40,000 pages, and based on what we found, we filed a writ of coram nobis to overturn the guilty verdict against him due to prosecutorial misconduct. We had, we believed, solid evidence from the files to support our case, but we lost in part because of bad luck regarding the judges assigned to us -- that's another story. Let's move ahead twenty-five years to when I began filing new FOIA requests for documents related to the case, and only a few months ago did the FBI finally answer our queries with the shocking news that they have over 500,000 pages of documents relating to the case and its participants. So in effect when Alger went to court in 1978 to do battle again with the government, it was akin to stepping up to the plate against Sandy Koufax with a whiffle ball bat in your hand.

The first new batches of documents that have so far been released have been very informative, and I want to speak today about what they reveal for the first time about the FBI's role in shaping the testimony of one key witness in the case, Hede Massing, who was mentioned earlier as a particularly convincing witness against Hiss. I don't know if any of you remember the old Tom Lehrer's song about Alma Mahler-Gropius-Werfel who married three great European geniuses, and the line went, "Alma, tell us, all modern women are jealous, though you didn't even use Ponds, you got Gustav and Walter and Franz."

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Lehrer could have written a similar song about Hede Massing, who was the European's left equivalent of Alma. In fact, the FBI described her in one document as a Viennese woman with a doubtful reputation. In the 1920's and 1930's, she lived or married three very prominent German leftists: Gerhart Eisler, Julian Gomperz, and Paul Massing. With the three serving as her mentors, she claims she joined the communist underground in the 1930's, served in various capacities until she and Paul Massing broke with the party in 1938. At the second Hiss trial, she was the only person to corroborate Whittaker Chambers's story that Alger Hiss was once a member of the communist underground.

Sam Tanenhaus says her testimony was crucial to the prosecution.

Ralph de Toledano and Victor Lasky who were both openly allied with the prosecution, called her testimony "a staggering blow for the defense." That might be an exaggeration but clearly it didn't help any, this despite the fact that her testimony had nothing to do with either of the two charges against Hiss: 1) that he lied when he denied seeing Chambers after January 1st, 1937, and, 2) that he lied when he denied handing documents to Chambers. In essence, the story that she told at the trial was this: As a member of the Soviet underground, it was her job to recruit new members. One of her targets was a State Department official named Noel Field, but after asking Field to work for her, he told her he was being recruited by another underground group leader.

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Massing asked to meet this person, and in 1935, Field introduced her to Alger Hiss at a cocktail party in his Washington, DC apartment. There, the two verbally jostled over who would lay claim to Field's loyalty. Massing flirtatiously told Hiss that as a woman she had the advantage. The conversation concluded though with one of them saying -- and she couldn't recall who -- it doesn't matter since we both work for the same boss. While the defense attacked her credibility on cross-examination and rebuttal by suggesting that she had previously told a more nebulous version of the story and that she was testifying under the threat of deportation, it did not have all the information it needed to shake her testimony. As it turns out, though, the prosecution did.

With the new files, we can now track how Massing's allegations developed and changed under considerable pressure from the FBI. These documents confirm many of the suspicions raised by the defense in 1949, while raising even more questions about her testimony that went beyond anything even imagined by Hiss's attorneys. Massing told her life story in 1951 in her book, "This Deception," which is given great credence by several Hiss historians. Allen Weinstein, for example, cites "This Deception" as one of the two main sources in his chapter on her in "Perjury." The FBI files reveal however that the book was written while her husband was completely dependent on the FBI's approval and in his battle to obtain U.S. citizenship. Also according to the files, Massing submitted the manuscript to the bureau for its approval prior to

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publication, and she allowed the FBI to rewrite portions of the text to eliminate what it felt were potentially embarrassing details regarding its agents' relationship with her.

When the FBI also began comparing the stories she told in the book to her earlier testimony and statements, they found a number of discrepancies, and Massing admitted to them that she changed the facts to improve her stories.

So what are the major revelations that have come from these recent new FBI releases?

Here are a few of the more important ones:

Massing was indeed testifying under threat of deportation, her husband's. Paul Massing had lied to the INS about his membership in the Communist Party in connection with his application for naturalization.

Files confirmed the defense's suspicion that Hede also lied to the FBI about her and her husband's past when she was interviewed in 1942. She also lied to the INS about her party affiliations when she became a naturalized citizen in 1927. Thus both were liable for prosecution and deportation during the period when jail or deportation for perjury was not unusual, and deportation to Europe could have meant death for one or both of them.

When denying Paul Massing's application, however, the INS did give Paul Massing an out. In its decision to turn down his application, the district office stated that he had failed to show sufficient attachment to the principles of the Constitution of the United States. And as the FBI summarized the challenge from Massing, if he wanted INS approval, he needed to establish

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that he was, “Anticommunist and anti-Soviet and pro-United States as far back as he could go.”

And to do that, all he and his wife would have to do is cooperate with the bureau.

So when the arrest of Gerhart Eisler presented them the opportunity to do so, the Massings became confidential informants of the FBI in 1947, in the hope that naming names would prove their “pro-Americanism” and “anticommunism” to both the FBI and the INS and keep them from jail or deportation.

And by the way, one of the first things Hede agreed to do was testify against Eisler, her former mate and the man now married to her sister. As confidential informants, the Massings were interviewed repeatedly and thoroughly by the FBI beginning in March 1947, but not until five days after Whittaker Chambers turned over the Pumpkin films to HUAC investigators on December 2nd, 1948, did Hede Massing ever mention her story about Alger Hiss to the bureau, this despite being given every opportunity to do so. The Massings were not only interviewed by the FBI and the INS, but also by the State Department and HUAC. During these extensive debriefing sessions, Hede Massing also offered nothing about Hiss. This admission was especially glaring during her 1946 interview with Raymond Murphy, the State Department security officer, who had already interviewed Whittaker Chambers and admittedly had personal antipathy toward Hiss.

In recounting their interview with Murphy to the FBI in 1947, the Massings declared that they had, “held nothing back,” yet Hede never once mentioned Hiss’s name. Massing’s own

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espionage story changed and developed drastically with each retelling from 1942 to 1951, as did her story about Hiss within that period, so much so that had the contents of her interviews been available to the defense, her credibility as a witness would surely have been shattered.

The new material also gives us a chance to check on the work of Allen Weinstein and others. Bill Reuben used to repeatedly tell me, “Weinstein is very convincing unless you know the record,” and the new releases bear that out. Weinstein writes in “Perjury” about the FBI’s interview of Dorothy Detzer, a friend of Massing’s and a Washington insider, who said Massing had once mentioned Hiss to her.

The files reveal, however, that Weinstein uses incomplete quotations to make his point. For example, he quotes from the FBI’s description of its interview with Detzer as she relays what she claims was her interview with Massing. “Detzer is certain his --” meaning Hiss’s “-- name was mentioned along with Noel Field.” But here’s the full sentence of the report on Detzer’s comment regarding Massing and Hiss: “Dorothy Detzer can not now recall exactly what part Alger Hiss played in his apparatus, although she is certain his name was mentioned, along with Field.” She also called Hiss a liberal and not a communist.

The files also show that Detzer had a beef with Hiss over his decision not to hire her at the San Francisco conference. That also didn’t make it into “Perjury.” He does report that Detzer told the FBI about a conversation with FBI official Howland Shaw, and Shaw told her “there are some who say that Alger Hiss is a communist,” but while Weinstein reports that Shaw

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ended up as a character witness for Hiss, he doesn't report that Shaw was firm in saying he never heard such stories about Hiss. Actually, one of the best indicators that Weinstein places more stock in Detzer's interview than the FBI did, is that as late as November 1949, ten months after they first interviewed Detzer, the FBI was still looking for someone to corroborate what Massing had to say, and Detzer was never called as a prosecution witness.

In "The Haunted Wood," Weinstein and Vassiliev quote from what they claim are KGB documents that discuss Massing's meeting with Hiss, but aside from the fact that Hiss's name is not actually mentioned in the documents, a codename is used, as was talked about this before, they offer an account of the Massing-Field-Hiss relationship that contradicts every version of the story that Massing gave to the FBI. The document even purports to discuss a meeting with Hiss that Field had with Hiss in Washington, but the factual record shows conclusively that Field wasn't in the country at the time. There simply isn't enough time to show all the holes in Massing's story, but the documents make it clear that those who have cited Massing's tale as proof of Hiss's guilt are 1) wrong, and 2) should have known better, and I think probably did.

They also show that if the FBI's handling of Hede Massing was any indication of how it dealt with the rest of the case, then Alger Hiss, a good and decent man, suffered a terrible injustice, the extent of which we're only starting to piece together more than fifty years after the terrible deed was done. Thank you.

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YOUNG: Thank you. Thank all of you. That was perfectly timed. We started late, but even so, we have to move on. We have ten to twelve minutes for questions. If you have questions, please step to a microphone and feel free to ask them.