An Old Communist Ponders Life As A Red Menace -- Scales Worked In The South For Rights Of Blacks

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PINE BUSH, N.Y. - In a hilltop cottage, reached by a half-mile dirt and stone drive through a forest of oak, ash and maple trees, Junius Irving Scales is living out a quiet retirement after a stormy life.

This gentle, round-faced man with striking blue eyes was once one of the most prominent targets of U.S. government agents for his activities organizing mostly black tobacco workers and white mill hands in the South of the 1940s and '50s for the Communist Party USA.

According to historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Scales was the only Communist ever sent to prison under the membership clause of the Smith Act, which made it a crime to belong to organizations that advocated the violent overthrow of the government,

Scales, 76, says neither he nor the party had such aspirations.

"My whole political past, I don't consider it time shot to hell," he says. "I think we played a good role as advance guards for the civil-rights movement, and that was a great satisfaction."

Similar set of goals

John Egerton, author of "Speak Now Against The Day: The Generation Before The Civil Rights Movement," says that while some black leaders felt the Communist Party manipulated racial issues, they shared similar goals with the Southern Communists of the '30s, '40s and '50s.

"To the extent that they took an interest in race relations," Egerton says, the Southern Communists "were definitely on the cutting edge."

Scales' father was a prominent lawyer and developer, his grandfather a colonel in the Confederate Army and his great-uncle a North Carolina governor.

"I only knew blacks as servants," Scales says. "My associations were only with upper-class whites. When I realized that most of the population wasn't where I was, it was like a closed book to me, so I was anxious to explore it."

At first, Scales said he idealized blacks and white workers, but he soon realized they carried prejudices like everyone else.

"But all in all, I put that in balance," he says. "I felt that both black and white workers were extremely wronged by the society they belonged to, and I was determined to do something about it."

Scales had no illusions about the risks of joining an unpopular Communist Party in the 1940s.

"You don't just in a leisurely fashion stick your hand into a buzz saw," he said.

After serving in the Army in World War II, Scales publicly declared his membership in the Communist Party in 1947. While Scales was a party leader in Tennessee and the Carolinas, his phone was tapped, and FBI agents constantly followed him, his friends and even his mother, he says.

When Scales was arrested on Nov. 18, 1954, it was like a scene from a cops and robbers movie.

"We gotcha, Scales! Don't move! This is it! This is the end of the road!" the agents said as they surrounded him on a Memphis, Tenn., street corner, according to Scales' autobiography.

Two trials followed, along with appeals that reached the Supreme Court.

Felt betrayed by Stalin

Scales left the party in 1957, months before his second trial. Stalin's crimes had come to light, and the Soviet army invaded Hungary in 1956.

The American Communists, he says, "were duped. We'd been unwitting apologists for one of the worst regimes of the century."

And with the civil-rights movement under way after the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, Scales felt the party had served its purpose in the South.

But the party's work was not forgotten. During his second trial in Greensboro, N.C., two men from the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People approached Scales in a secluded courthouse alcove. The two men were evidently nervous, aware of the risks of being seen with a notorious former Communist.

"They stuck out their hands and told me very rapidly that they reported to Martin Luther King Jr. every night about the trial and that he was intensely interested and wished me well," Scales recalls. "And then they were gone."

After the Supreme Court upheld his second conviction on June 5, 1961, Scales began serving a six-year sentence.

"They wanted somebody as an example," says Richard Nickson, professor emeritus of English at William Paterson College in New Jersey, who first met Scales nearly 60 years. "And so they chose a most unlikely candidate as posing any kind of threat to anybody or any country."

A long list of prominent figures, including King, Eleanor Roosevelt and poets W.H. Auden and Archibald MacLeish, wrote to President John F. Kennedy, seeking Scales' early release.

Despite the objections of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and others, Attorney General Robert Kennedy advised his brother to free Scales because he thought the man had been unfairly convicted, according to then-Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach.

Katzenbach, who advised against releasing Scales, nevertheless called Robert Kennedy's decision "courageous."

"He didn't do it out of any great sympathy for Junius Scales, particularly," Katzenbach says. "It was simply that he thought that was not what this country's law was all about."

The president on Christmas Eve 1962 commuted Scales' sentence to 15 months served.

Released from prison at age 42, Scales realized his activist days were over.

"We didn't have anything when I got out of prison," says Scales, who had a wife and daughter to support. "My family had suffered enough from my doings, so I decided to head to a high-paying job."

Scales became an overnight proofreader at The New York Times. His wife, Gladys, who struggled to make ends meet during her husband's trials and imprisonment and spearheaded a writing campaign to free him, became a teacher.

"My wife had been through so much," he says. "She was a teacher with a great gift, and I felt that she should be the concentration point."

Gladys Scales died of lymphoma in 1981. Many of Scales' Communist Party friends and most of the players in his trials are also gone.

"When I look through my telephone directory for the last 40 years, more people are dead than alive," he laments. "I'm increasingly impressed by my growing status as a relic of a time long past."

Scales spends most of his time now pursuing his lifelong love for music, attending concerts and opera performances.

He continues to share his ideals in occasional speeches to history groups and in conversations with friends and family.

When he looks at the South today, Scales observes that racism is far from dead and the right to vote is constantly under threat.

"It's a big relief not to see separate drinking fountains when I go south, but I realize it's paper thin," he said. "It's a long way from being the brotherhood of man."