

Mencken, Nietzsche, and The Chosen

By Robert J. Dieli

Columbus Institute for Contemporary Journalism
Columbus, Ohio

Dedication

To Rosemary, my late wife,
for forbearance

Copyright © 2006 by Robert J. Dieli, Inc.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotes used in reviews, no part of this publication may be reproduced for any purpose except by written permission of the copyright owner.

Author: Robert J. Dieli, Sr.

Please address requests for books to:

Robert Dieli, Sr.
E-Mail: rjdsr25103@yahoo.com
103 Highland Terrace
Worthington, Ohio 43085
614.433.7524

ISBN: 0-938404-20-2

Acknowledgments

My later wife of 51 years, Rosemary, for her support.

Mayo Dubasky of Hoxie, Kansas: She is an extremely brilliant Mencken scholar and editor of the imposing book, **The Gist of Mencken**. A retired U.S. Library of Congress Researcher, Mayo reviewed my manuscript and provided many novel insights about Mencken and Nietzsche.

James Dieli of Carlsbad California: My older brother, Jim, provided the Mencken sketches which help catch the vital components of the Baltimore Bard's multi-dimensional character.

Connie Parkinson of Reynoldsburg, Ohio: Mrs. Parkinson was my original editor. She was of invaluable assistance in getting the original manuscript of its way.

Bob Dieli, Jr. of Kauai, Hawaii: My son, a recreation specialist for the Division of Fish and Wildlife, has provided the moral support for this book's final publishing.

Bob Fitrakis of Columbus, Ohio: Full-time Professor at Columbus State Community College, Lawyer, investigative reporter, Publisher/Editor of the Free Press, Executive Director of the Columbus Institute for Contemporary Journalism, Central Ohio's "gadfly, soon to become a national disturber of the peace" in the best Mencken tradition. An avowed Liberal Socialist, Bob has demonstrated his complete advocacy of free speech in publishing this book.

Table of Contents

Preface	i
Prologue	vi
Introduction	viii
Chapter 1: Who is H. L. Mencken?	1
Chapter 2: Aristophanic Blood Brethren	14
Chapter 3: Formal Education and Early Jewish Contacts	19
Chapter 4: The “Sporting” Mencken	32
Chapter 5: Mencken Ascendant	42
Chapter 6: From Huxley and Summen by Way of Nietzsche	71
Chapter 7: The Abuse of Language: Its Relation to Anti-Semitism	91
Chapter 8: H. L. Mencken and the Women Question	101
Chapter 9: The Musical Mencken	118
Chapter 10: Men vs. The Man	131
Chapter 11: Mencken, the Libertarian	148
Chapter 12: Developing a Style	157
Chapter 13: Mencken, Germany, and the Vatican	174
Chapter 14: Essays, Good Food, and Swell Drinks	190
Chapter 15: Cash Cows and Critics	206
Chapter 16: Nietzsche and Mencken’s Translation of his The Antichrist	222
Chapter 17: Courtship Days and Marriage to Sara	246
Chapter 18: A Multi-Perspective Mencken	261
Chapter 19: Walter Lippmann and H. L. Mencken	277
Chapter 20: After The American Mercury	290
Chapter 21: A Philo-Semitic Mencken	305

Chapter 22: Mencken, Hitler, and the Jews	332
Chapter 23: HLM, FDR, Truman, and Jewish Issues	349
Chapter 24: Walter Winchell: A Classic Case of Hatred	372
Chapter 25: Angoff, Hecht, and Anti-Semitism	392
Chapter 26: The White Paper	403
Chapter 27: The Mencken Diary Panel Meeting and Subsequent Events	418
Chapter 28: Mencken's Eclectic, Non-Philosophical Writings	432
Chapter 29: Amor Fati	438
Chapter 30: Mencken, Fecher, and Judaic Orthodoxy	451
Chapter 31: Sidney Zion, A Genuine Mencken Mavin	464
Chapter 32: Major Ethical Entries in HLM's Diary	478
Chapter 33: Mencken's Last Stand	493
Epilogue	507
Appendix	510
Bibliography	523
Index	531

Preface

The famous French essayist, Michel Eyquem Montaigne (1533-1592), anticipated H. L. Mencken's unconventional, off-the-wall wisdom with this brilliant aphorism:

The most Apparent Sign of True WISDOM is
A Constant and Unrestrained REJOICING.

Besides taking on most of the quacks thriving so well in the American scheme of things, Mencken (1880-1956) seldom passed up an opportunity for pummeling the Puritans who were then in control of American morality and ethics. Practically all the dominant Protestant creeds inhibited the exercise of conviviality and good cheer, making the observance of the Sabbath a grim day devoted largely to prayer, meditation, repentance, and penitential spasms. With bulldog persistence, he took on the Puritans over Prohibition from around 1913 to its abolishment in 1933. A fearless fighter for the basic joys of life, Mencken continually denounced the Ku Klux Klan's racism against Blacks, Catholics, and Jews, contending the KKK was the secular arm of the Southern Methodists and Baptists. An aggressive agnostic, Mencken often critiqued Protestant creeds much more severely than Catholicism and Judaism, and yet he is seldom attacked as an anti-Protestant.

Why this discrepancy? Why this perpetual charge that Mencken was an anti-Semite, when ethnicity was such an integral part of American culture during Mencken's heyday? To judge Mencken as an anti-Semite now is to apply today's political correctness standards alongside current debased Jewish application as to what constitutes an anti-Semite, a term which no one yet has precisely defined.

Outright attack was Mencken's format for dealing with the all-too-many frauds and quacks in control of the nation's destiny. Mencken borrowed this technique from Nietzsche: its value consists in having high-ranking enemies whose inverse task was to keep Mencken sharp and on his toes. In most cases Mencken's forthright assaults were a form of gratitude because he was elated that there were so many delightful targets and pompous personalities to deflate and bring down to earth. Laughter and good

Preface

cheer, aligned with a searching, all-embracing perky personality enable the Baltimore Bard to apply his devastating assaults against the “sacred cows” operating largely unmolested until Mencken’s written assaults took all of the air out of their conceited, over inflated egos.

What made H. L. Mencken’s overall approach to life and his subsequent writing career so remarkable were his unorthodox views of the human predicament from a life-affirming perspective. At age forty (1920) Mencken was delighted and surprised to learn that by inheritance he was an integral part of a German heritage, namely that of professors Lüder Mencken and Johann Burkhard Mencken (1674-1732) and a whole host of other scholarly Menckens. Johann Mencken’s 1715 book, *The Charlatanry of the Learned*, took Europe by storm, unmasking the follies and foibles of the European mountebanks. Up to the end of the Napoleonic era it was translated into many European languages. The English edition, under H. L. Mencken’s supervision, was published in 1937.

After his high school days, Mencken became totally immersed in and fully enjoyed the great game of life as a reporter, columnist, newspaper and magazine editor, philologist, author, acerbic and yet playful critic of all major aspects of the human condition. Often operating under very stressful conditions, Mencken was a supreme advocate of the good life wherein fine food, swell drinks, excellent music, and superb company, both male and female, were on tap to make life affirmative, enjoyable, creative and worthwhile. Mencken’s work was a labor of love; his main recreation consisted in playing second piano with the Saturday Evening Club from 1904 to late November 1948, and listening to classical music. Like a hen laying eggs, Mencken was a compulsive, yet joyful workaholic, often mirthfully cackling over his ingenious choice of potent phrases and words, particularly at presidential political conventions.

Mencken loved most German-American Jews with whom he did business, as well as those with whom he often partook of the social amenities including “swell boozing.” He lauded the Jews for being strongly against Prohibition. However, Mencken was very wary of Ashkenazic Jews, based on his personal contacts, insights, and experiences both at home and abroad. His most rancid critic and former “office boy,” Charles Angoff, of Ashkenazic stock, claimed that Mencken “loved them (Jews) and feared them.”¹ This incredible statement demonstrated that after ten years as Mencken’s editorial manager, Angoff had little inkling as to where Mencken was coming from,

because H. L. Mencken feared neither mortal man nor ethnic or religious groups.

All through his wide-ranging writings concerning *The Chosen*, Mencken constantly distinguished between his deep affection for German and European Jews and his aversion toward those Jews originating from Eastern Europe, as well as those Jews from in and beyond the Pale. Around the turn of the twentieth century, American German-Jewish rabbis and their secular leaders categorized teeming millions of Jews as “Orientals.” Included in this prototyping were various references to these Jews as Ashkenazics and Ostjuden, most of whom spoke Judeo-Yiddish dialects. According to the “uptown” Jews, these low-class “Orientals,” made up of largely dirt-poor Jews, often Socialists, Communists, or radicals, gave them a bad reputation. A vulgar form of uptown Jew-hatred prevailed against ghetto Jews, living in the bowels of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and other New York City boroughs. Every German-American Jew who thought like Mencken should have been categorized as a blatant anti-Semite, since their anti-Oriental prejudices coincided with Mencken’s. There is a theory that only Jews can make bona fide judgments as to who is and who is not an anti-Semite. That belief is bosh, because the Jews are fighting constant wars among themselves as to who is a Jew and who is not one.

Nietzsche and Mencken highly praised the ancient Jews, based on their Old Testament grandeur. However, they were ever ready to point out Jewish shortcomings in their medieval and modern settings. Both acerbic critics went out of their way to severely critique Jewish values they diagnosed as being inimical to master morality versus slave morality, especially in the realms of theology and ethics. Being on the defensive for 2000-plus years, all too many oversensitive Jews damned Nietzsche and Mencken for their unique insights into the overall Jewish predicament. Until collective Jewry begins to comprehend the Nietzsche/Mencken insights into both ancient and modern Judaism and its long struggle for survival and autonomy, they are victimized by their inbred hostility to open discourse.

Unfortunately, most modern Jews have been thoroughly indoctrinated that the Nietzsche-Mencken duo were against the Jews. This is brazen poppycock. Why do the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and other prominent Jewish organizations have a vested interest in continuing this tripe? Until all-too-sensitive Jews come down to earth, they lack the capacity to distinguish between who are for and against them. The Chosen should understand that

Preface

Nietzsche and Mencken thrive on creative, in-depth controversy, just as the Jews have done since the dawn of history. They are inhibiting Nietzsche's and Mencken's availability for present and future generations by their inept attempts to categorize and damn them as being against collective Jewish interests. Nietzsche's and Mencken's praises and criticisms of The Chosen are their unique forms of gratitude to an ethnic and religious group who have proved that they can endure and prosper under the most trying conditions to become arbiters of human values for "good and bad," but not for "good and evil."

If the Baltimore Sage had only assaulted the killjoys dominating the American regime, he would have made his sterling imprint upon the American scene; however, his overall impact upon American literature and journalism was of monumental proportions in areas few writers and editors dare to venture. He was an expert diagnostician, but at best a mediocre prognosticator of events. Mencken's continual, unrestrained rejoicings over the shortcomings of the human condition in the realms of theology, philosophy, and metaphysics, and the many invented subsequent shibboleths to justify them, can be best summed up in one of his more devastating aphorisms:

Wars, and similar disturbances of the peace, will always be in vogue as long as babies are born with small brains and large raging hormones.

It is even possible for such a babe to become President of the United States, as witness the current incumbent's preemptive, pathological propensities and policies to bash any nation or ethnic group standing in his way. We suffer most, not when the White House is a peaceful dormitory, but when it is a jitney Mars Hill, with a tin-pot Georgie bawling from the roof.

Where are you, Henry Louis Mencken, now that we really need you?

Bob Dieli
March 2006

Prologue

In mentioning or talking about Mencken or Nietzsche to people from all walks of life, almost to a person they stated or asked me if both men were anti-Semites. The anti-Defamation League (ADL) and allied Jewish organizations have effectively sown bitter seeds of malicious malignity against the Mencken/Nietzsche combination, despite their fulsome praises along with their creative, yet controversial critiques of *The Chosen*. The Mencken and President Truman diaries, along with Nietzsche's books and notes, provide classic examples of the impoverishment of past and current dialogues about racism, anti-Semitism and their stereotypes that all too often lead to the misuse and abuse of the word "prejudice." Mencken and Nietzsche were certainly prejudiced against the worst aspects of Judaism, Christianity, democracy, communism, current morals, value systems, and hosts of other "isms." However, that doesn't make them anti-Semites.

Unfortunately today, anyone who expresses a genuine prejudice is often denounced as an anti-Semite. Many academicians contend that Mencken and Nietzsche were bigots even though they spotlighted the severe shortcomings of modern education. Mencken and Nietzsche were not prejudiced against individuals; they used persons (FDR and Wagner) to spotlight the issues they were intent on improving. They were prejudiced for higher standards and against traditional groups that worked against their proposed remedies.

Someone who has strong prejudices, but lives his life without relying on those prejudices, should not be put into the same category as Jew-haters—which Mencken, Nietzsche, and Truman definitely were not. Let it be emphatically and categorically stated: Mencken, Nietzsche, and Truman were neither anti-Semites, nor enemies of the Jews. According to many documented, American, latter-day Jewish sources, the same cannot be said for FDR and cohorts!



Introduction

In his twenty-nine-page introduction to his translation of *The Antichrist*, H. L. Mencken, in describing Nietzsche, unwittingly draws an amazing self-portrait. I take the liberty to change Nietzsche's persona to Mencken's and let this change of persons speak for itself:

I daresay that [Mencken], had he been alive, would have got a lot of satisfaction out of the execration heaped on him, not only because, being so vain a fellow, he enjoyed execrations as a tribute to his general singularity and hence to his superiority, but also more importantly because, being no mean psychologist, he would have recognized the disconcerting doubts underlying it. If [Mencken's] criticisms of democracy were as ignorant and empty, say, as the average clergyman's criticism of Darwin's hypothesis of natural selection, then the advocates of democracy could afford to dismiss it as loftily as the Darwinians dismiss the blather of holy clerks. And if his attack upon Christianity were mere sound and fury signifying nothing, then there would be no calls for anathemas from the sacred desk.²

Sigmund Freud paid high tribute to Nietzsche but, unlike Mencken, he refused to immerse himself in the Nietzschean literature:

Nietzsche, the other philosopher whose premonitions and insights often agree in the most amazing manner with the laborious results of

Introduction

psychoanalysis, I have avoided for this reason. After all, I was less concerned about any propriety than about the preservation of my open-mindedness.³

Mencken's Debt to Nietzsche as Outlined by Edward Stone

Mencken, on the other hand, had totally immersed himself in many aspects of Nietzsche's works and life, to the extent that he translated the 1921 introduction of *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*. Both Nietzsche and Mencken were intent on ripping asunder the decayed foundations of miasmic metaphysics and rancid theologies to help genuine thinkers to demolish old, desiccated philosophies and religions based on ersatz metaphysical foundations.

Unconsciously and unwittingly, Mencken repeatedly borrowed and incorporated Nietzsche's dynamic ideas all through his writings. Even so, he said in a 1937 note:

"In my own mind, my debt to Nietzsche seems very slight, though I confess that other people seem to have put a larger value on it."⁴

He also made copious use of Nietzsche's more notable phrases and words, such as the "reevaluation of values," "transvaluation of all values," "will to power," "dancing with arms and legs." Thousands of references to Nietzsche are sprinkled all through Mencken's writings.

Perhaps Mencken had inadvertently embraced one of Nietzsche's most profound aphorisms:

I have done that, says my memory: I could not have done that, says my pride, and remains inexorable. Finally, my memory yields.⁵

How could a mental giant of Mencken's stature not realize his reliance on Nietzsche? Most scholars only hint at Mencken's debt to Nietzsche. This lack of confirmation, in the face of conclusive evidence, is indicative of the apathetic bent which shows a marked indifference or the typical casual disposition of academicians when they fail to do their homework. Until this issue is fully rectified, the Mencken/Nietzsche relationship will be lost in the fogs of literary and academic obscurantism.

Introduction

Nietzsche and Mencken were action-oriented thinkers. In the history of philosophy, there have been very few action-oriented philosophers, except for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, all of whom were wrestlers and soldiers. Aristotle was also Alexander the Great's personal teacher. Another such philosopher was the great Roman emperor/philosopher Marcus Aurelius, author of *Meditations*.

With few exceptions, philosophers choose the life of meditation over a life of action. On this ground alone, this classification would strip Mencken of any philosophic system because the life of action can never be tied to a thought system. It is only when behavior supplants action that massive conformity takes over and the individual is given short shrift. This is why the life of contemplation in a university setting demands suspension of action, unless the professor defies conventional wisdom at the risk of losing permanent tenure. Even the great German systematic philosophers, Kant and Hegel, were brilliant wards of the state educational system. They had to write reconditely and obtusely to escape the prying eyes of the religious and secular authorities of their era. Nietzsche and Mencken, as rugged, action-oriented individualists, were disturbers of the peace, irreverent iconoclasts who relished controversy, competition, and lively public forums. They went to great lengths to establish many public niches, while closely guarding their private lives.

System Shortcomings

The whole of Mencken's writings and his thinking was precisely delineated when F. W. Nietzsche asserted:

The will to a system: In a philosopher usually speaking, a subtle corruption, a disease of the character amorally speaking, his will to appear more stupid than he is. . . . I am not bigoted enough for a system—and not for even my system. . . . the will to a system is a lack of integrity. . . .building systems is childishness.⁶

With few exceptions, academicians encapsulate themselves into prevailing systems of thought. Not to be part of a dominant system in any line of endeavor is a defiant challenge to authority. Only rare individuals dare to operate in the orbit of their solo endeavors which run counter to current

Introduction

dogmas. It is in this context that Mencken and Nietzsche took on the authorities of their respective eras. Both paid a heavy price for being existentially sound. Rather than encapsulating their lives within the confines of philosophical systems, these rare, free-spirited thinkers strongly endorsed their affirmations of life to extremely cruel fates. However, their enduring legacies will serve humankind until the end of time.

Since Mencken and Nietzsche continue to be accused of being anti-Semitic, this book gives a wide-ranging overview covering major portions of Mencken's contributions to and impact on American journalism and literature with special emphasis on Jewish issues. Mencken expropriated many pertinent Nietzschean perspectives and concepts relative to Hebraic moral valuations in the realms of Western religions, politics, economics, and social concerns.

It is nigh impossible to completely comprehend Mencken's contributions to American literature, journalism, politics, and history unless one has a basic understanding of his distinct relationship with F. W. Nietzsche (1844-1900), the volatile, bombastic German thinker, particularly the specific areas where Mencken assimilated portions of Nietzsche's concepts. This was outlined in Edward Stone's 1937 M.A. thesis, *Henry Louis Mencken's Indebtedness to Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche*. Stone's thesis has ten chapters with 643 notes, demonstrating Mencken's heavy reliance on Nietzsche in the areas of aristocracy, politics, morality, religion, ethics, women, and many other intellectual topics. Over the course of his long, illustrious writing career, Mencken went to Nietzsche's school of divine damnation and earthly salvation, while blocking out Nietzsche's mystical perspectives. Mencken expropriated, exploited, and bent many Nietzschean concepts and ideas to fit his own practical views.

Wily, versatile, clever, much traveled and severely tested, Mencken is modernity's counterpart to Aristophanes, the great Greek dramatist of ancient tradition. Whereas Aristophanes was a superb poetical genius, the dynamic, controversial Mencken was a masterful rhetorician, constantly battling politicians, prelates, educators, and the usually smug status quo authorities and other *pediculae*. He often emerged bloodied, but unbowed, and over the long run more than held his own in his constant attempts to enlighten that portion representing the civilized American populace.

It is necessary to emphasize and outline how Mencken completely adopted Nietzsche's dicta to become a versatile, sagacious mental warrior, based on the German's strategy outlined in his book, *Ecce Homo*, and in my

Introduction

chapter 6.

It was the Danish/Jewish professor George Brandes (1842-1927) who first came on the European scene to proclaim the greatness of Nietzsche to his European counterparts. Mencken basically performed the same task for his American readers. Even though Mencken has been dead fifty years, his popularity periodically rises and ebbs. However, with a spate of new Mencken books, his renown has been reincarnated, because what Mencken critiqued in his inimitable style has belatedly hit home onto a dazed nation wallowing in the depths of corruption, decadence, nihilism, drug addiction, political pandering, and total confusion. Even academics have begun to stir out of their ruts to again size up the Mencken “monster” who is still a boogey man in most college journalism classes.

The usually rational Mencken also had a method that he claimed had amazing powers to annihilate anyone intent on doing severe damage to him. It is in this context that the following tale is mentioned with tongue in cheek. Mencken’s ghostly powers surfaced in a full three-page article⁷ featuring the former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, who took Mencken to task, stating that “Mencken was a cynical man who hated the people and turned the media against politicians.” As an alternative, Gingrich suggested a Mencken compatriot, Frank R. Kent (1878-1958). Kent ran a daily *Sun* front-page column, “The Great Game of Politics,” which Kent converted into a best-selling book. A young Kent was considerate and kind to the general run of politicians of his day, as contrasted with Mencken’s hard-hitting criticisms.

For belaboring Mencken, nasty Newt paid dearly with loss of status as Speaker of the House and was forced to resign from the U. S. Congress over a book deal.

It is generally agreed by most Mencken experts that there is no way he could function in today’s daily metropolitan newspapers. Based on the rigid enforcement of political correctness, no known metro newspaper would touch him with a fifty-foot pole. As far as Mencken using the airwaves or television, the same political correctness would apply. Furthermore, Mencken did not like to give speeches to large groups. He was an engaging speaker in front of friends and small groups. One of his many paradoxes was his extreme endorsement of Libertarian views on social and political issues, counterbalanced by his tough Tory economic stances more in line with Graham Sumner’s capitalistic dogmas. In the political realm Mencken never tired of reiterating that he believed in free speech up to and including the last

Introduction

limits of the endurable.

Because he refused to come out openly for The Chosen while under tremendous Jewish pressure to disavow Hitler, Mencken was labeled an anti-Semite. But this inner circle of Jews who intimately knew him (including his publisher Alfred A. Knopf, musician and professor Louis Cheslock, television producer Lawrence Spivak, publisher Abraham Cahan, and a host of other Jewish friends) maintained that he was anything but an anti-Semite. At the other end of the spectrum were the pro-Hitler German-Americans who accused the Baltimore Bard of taking Jewish money. Mencken was in a no-win situation—and the accusations are still a burning issue.

Nietzsche and Mencken went to the extreme limit, stating that the Jews are still supreme arbiters of worldwide values because they have cleverly inverted major Christian moralities to their advantage (the “transvaluation of all values”), while overcoming two thousand years of persecutions, wanderings, and sufferings.

From a Mencken perspective it is necessary to grasp how he used two of Nietzsche’s oft-quoted words—*Herrenmoral* or master morality and *Sklavemoral*, or slave morality—of the ancient Jews which served an admirable purpose in its time, for it enabled the Jews by self-effacement to survive in the face of powerful foes. But when, as an appendage of Christianity, slave morality was taken over by the nations of Western Europe, it ceased to be appropriate, for the conditions of life in Western Europe differed vastly from the conditions of life in ancient Palestine. Latter-day Americans have no need to ask permissions from anyone; and yet, because we still cling to the slave morality we inherited from the ancient Jews, our “good” remain “humble—patient—obedient—long-suffering—resigned,” instead of “strong—ruling—independent.”

Hence Nietzsche’s bitter opposition to Christianity becomes apparent. Whereas the god of the early fighting Jews was powerful and ruthless, the god of the post-Exodus Jews was a mild and merciful judge. This habit of ascribing racial codes would be harmless enough if men invented a new god every time their mode of life was changed. Thus we modern Americans and Europeans still declare, when we worship the god of the post-Exodus Jews, that “the meek shall inherit the earth,” when we know very well that the meek do not inherit anything at all.

Nietzsche and Mencken believed that if the outworn moral code of the Jews were discarded, nations and individuals would make far more rapid

Introduction

progress than the world has ever seen. The higher man is an efficient and competent man who has rid himself of much cant and hypocrisy. He is not a predatory bully as many critics of Nietzsche seem to think, but an intelligent, creative thinker who has an eye not only for his immediate advancement, but also for the ultimate profit of humanity. He sees nothing admirable in poverty and humility.

Let the highest honors of the world go to those who make the most successful assault upon the forces and conditions that work against humanity. The result will be the gradual evolution of the *Übermensch* (Overman), a being exactly adapted in mind and body to the conditions of organic existence on the earth. He will be the absolute master of himself, defying all gods and devils and acknowledging allegiance to his fellows only for the good of himself and the human species.

The joyful skeptic Mencken knew that if and when the superior person(s) took over the destiny of mankind, it would be a long-term process before the democratic masses, with all of their shortcomings, would be relegated to an earthly limbo, to be replaced by an aristocratic system based on talent, competence, character, and positive, long-term results.

Mencken was often accused of being an anti-Semite. Not content to absolve his friend of all such charges, three years after Mencken's death Alfred A. Knopf, his publisher from 1917 to 1956, went out of his way to reminisce about his long-term relations with Mencken in an *Atlantic Monthly* article.⁸ Like many other Mencken experts, Knopf stressed the massive differences between Mencken's public style as a tough, cynical, amusing, loud and exasperating persona as opposed to the private man who was sentimental, unwavering, and generous to a fault. Knopf knew Mencken's talents to be amazingly varied. His journalistic career was a joy to behold, especially his ribald coverage of presidential conventions and campaigns. For a layman, his knowledge of medicine and the law was unparalleled. The realms of philology and semantics were areas in which Mencken shone to the extent that he took on the professionals in their respective fields and beat them at their own game. Further emphasis of Mencken's deep concern for America can be attributed to the famous Western-oriented naturalist and feisty author, Edwin Abbey (1927-1989). He uniquely summarized Mencken's political policies: "A patriot must always be ready to defend his country against its government." Mencken had pursued this procedural aim with bulldog persistence all through his multidimensional writing career.

Introduction

Although Mencken was a proclaimed agnostic, his knowledge of the Bible and religious documents was all-embracing. A patriot of the first rank, the cantankerous curmudgeon operated on these premises:

My country right or wrong.
To be kept right when right,
To be put right when wrong.

It is easy to make Mencken seem unsound by showing that his opinions at different times do not hang together, but the joke is on the critic if he is not aware from the start that Mencken's writings are not the exposition of a coherent body of thought, but the product of a visceral mood that usually takes a humorous turn; and that one of his characteristics is a love of pure mischief in his unique style as an emancipator of taste and an encourager of talent. All too many critics were too young and were too thoroughly immersed in the dregs of political correctness to understand where Mencken was coming from. As a result, they couldn't know him and totally misread many of his humorous essays and letters pertaining to Jewish personae.

Walter Lippmann, a premier Jewish journalist and author, wrote a series of refreshing remarks expressing his deep appreciation of Mencken's contributions to American literature and society.

What Mr. Mencken has created is a personal force in American life which has an extraordinary and vitalizing effect. How else can you explain the paradox of his popularity and the certainty that before he dies he will find himself, like Bernard Shaw today, one of the grand old men, one of the beloved patriarchs of his time? How in this land when all the politicians, pedagogues, peasants, etc., etc., are preposterous, has Henry L. Mencken, not aged fifty, become pope of popes? The answer is that he has the gift of life. His humor is so full of animal well-being that he acts upon the public like an elixir. The wounds he inflicts heal quickly. His blows have the clean brutality of a natural phenomenon. They are directed by a warm and violent but an unusually healthy mind which is not divided, as most minds are, by envy and fear and ambition. When you explain the heightening effect of a spirited horse, of a swift athlete, of a dancer in control of his [her] own body, when you can explain why watching them you feel more alive yourself,

you can explain the quality of his influence.

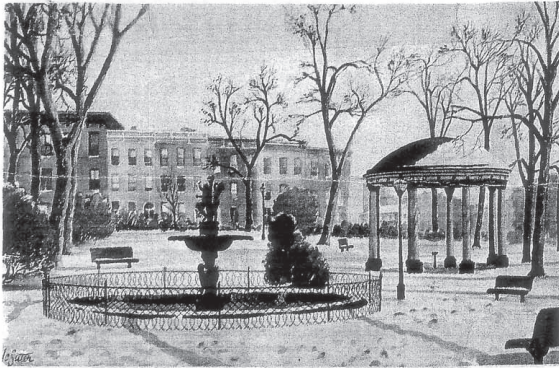
Not content to pull the legs of his readers, Mencken returns to old tricks with this shortened rendition that he sent to his friend George Sterling:

I have put your name down for the [Benedict] Arnold committee (to raise money for a statue for the infamous traitor) and shall send you your certificate of manuscript and silk rosette anon. The Hon. Charles Evans Hughes has consented to serve as honorary chairman and we hope to include a number of Anglo-Saxon chauvinists, especially Otto Kahn, Henry Morgenthau, Oscar Strauss, Rabbi Stephen Weiss, Horace B. Liveright, and Judge Brandeis.⁹

All of the persons named in both article and letter are Jews, not Anglo-Saxons. This is another illustration of Knopf stating, “Mencken wrote terribly funny letters about Jews—real and imaginary, and those taken literally would perhaps be most offensive—and they were always written to Jewish friends.”

Since the author has dealt with many recondite factors such as “the transvaluation of all values,” it is most appropriate to insert one of Mencken’s more humorous renditions.

The Republic is about to reelect Roosevelt triumphantly. He is the worst quack heard of since Abraham Lincoln, and in consequence he is apparently unbeatable. I marvel that our Heavenly Father doesn’t destroy all the great free democracies with a single blast of mustard gas. He’d do it; I am thoroughly convinced, if there were not so many Jews among us. He is naturally reluctant to assassinate His own people, and so the rest of us escape. It is a pity.¹⁰



*If cannibalism had not
been abolished in
Maryland some years
before my birth,
I'd have butchered
beautifully.*

Chapter 1

Who is H. L. Mencken?

Notice that the question is framed in the present tense. Although Mencken left this vale of tears in 1956, he is still a vivid presence on the American literary scene. The late 1989 *Diary* fiasco had the unintended merit of introducing two new generations to Mencken's indomitable character and his amazing multidimensional career. Fame is fleeting and notoriety is lasting: If this statement has legitimacy, then Mencken belongs to the ages.

As a child prodigy, he overcame his unusually early maturity to become a superb journalist, ready and able to take on an army of Philistines with little or no support. Precocious Henry Louis Mencken was born in Baltimore on September 12, 1880, on a Maryland state 1812 war holiday. He was known to his family as Harry. The family then lived at 380 West Lexington Street. His father, August Mencken Sr., paid delivery charges of \$10.00 to Dr. C. L. Buddenbohn. A chubby baby, Mencken later described his adiposity with this sterling statement:

If cannibalism had not been abolished in Maryland some years before my birth, I'd have butchered beautifully.

The younger Mencken children included Charles Edward, Anna Gertrude, and August Jr.. Charles and August Jr. demonstrated Menckenean

mental agility, earning their livelihoods as engineers. Gertrude never married; she lived to age ninety-five, mainly on a farm close to Baltimore which Mencken occasionally visited to enjoy her company and for bird watching.

While August Jr. plainly and simply loved his brother Harry, even tending him at the end of HLM's tumultuous life, Mencken's brother Charles, two years younger, provided all the physical buffeting and competition both growing youngsters needed. Charles was much better adapted to handle most physical aspects of life. Except for Henry's speed of foot, Charley was more adept and flexible, and stronger in practically all other physical movements requiring strength, agility, dexterity, and balance. Mencken claimed:

All my genes came from my father, who was probably the most incompetent man with his hands ever seen on earth. I can't recall his teaching me anything in my infancy, not even marbles.

From age three Mencken lived at 1524 Hollins Street, Baltimore. The narrow, brick three-story Mencken rowhouse is located across the eastern portion of Baltimore's Union Square, a far westside neighborhood park which currently serves the outdoor recreation needs of the local residents, despite its run-down appearance.

After HLM's brother August's death in 1967, the Mencken house became the headquarters for the University of Maryland School of Social Work and a residence for Vista volunteers. What an ironical turn of events. The Bard had to turn over in the family ledger grave when social workers took over his family abode. Mencken had made statements to this effect:

If public welfare was eliminated, we would have millions of virgins walking the streets, looking for gainful employment.

After the social workers left, the Mencken House became a museum under the auspices of the Baltimore City Life Museum. This museum was staffed with both paid workers and volunteer docents for weekend and special day visitors until in 1997 most Baltimore City Life museums were shut down, including the Mencken House Museum.

So far the Friends of the Mencken House have saved it from being sold by the city (and in the process discovered and treated a serious termite infestation). On July 1, 2002, the Friends received an IRS 501 (C) (3) status

to help them restore the house to its former museum status so that the public could once again feast off the creative, controversial Mencken legacy. As of December 2005 it stands empty.

Early Years

A very gifted youth possessing an amazing curiosity towards life, H. L. Mencken soon demonstrated his special talents to parents, relatives, teachers, and acquaintances. Leading an active, normal boyhood, “Harry” enjoyed all the privileges and advantages of an eldest son, living then in a comfortable German-American Baltimore neighborhood.

Around age twelve, Mencken gradually gave up the wanton joys of a normal youngster, shedding his carefree ways and affiliations with the Hollins Street gang and its tie-ins with Fire Engine House No. 14. He started to encapsulate himself almost totally within the world of books, magazines, and literature. August Sr. began to notice his eldest son was a bit round-shouldered and often exhorted him to throw back his shoulders and stick out his chest. The Bard claimed he still retained his foot speed until his early twenties. He had developed a deep breathing technique which provided him with his almost unlimited energy despite, over the years, putting on considerable weight as a devotee of good food and drink.

In his youth Mencken was enamored with poetry. His first published work, aside from his newspaper articles, was his 1903 opus, *Ventures Into Verse*. It was an experimental work which Mencken slyly tried to disown. Only a hundred copies were printed. Local gossip had it that Mencken bought up fifty copies and the rest became collectors’ items which are now scarce as hen’s teeth and bring big bucks. Another story has it that the printer kept the remaining fifty.

His musical talents came early to the fore. Mencken created and partly completed a vocal setting of his poem “Madrigal.” He also wrote numerous solo pieces and some trios for violin, cello, and piano.

Mencken turned to the essay and sold many short works to various publishers, most notably Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Mencken emerged from his poetic stage to become a strident critic of poetry when it failed to measure up to his demanding standards. He was death on mushy, gushy, sentimental, moonstruck poetry. Mencken highly valued the beauty of Old Testament poetry, maintaining that it was a necessary device

to cast the soft bandages of beautiful illusions over the dire human condition. The King James Version of the Bible earned Mencken's highest praise, not because it was true, but because of its remarkable capability of assuaging life's harshness by way of questionable, yet creative, fantasies.

For some indefinable reason, Mencken was intrigued with the Baltimore poet Lizette W. Reese, while neglecting or minimizing the poetic works of Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, and his long-time friend Ezra Pound, to whom he paid a 1948 visit at St. Elizabeth Asylum. For broadcasting on behalf of Mussolini against the Allies, Pound was incarcerated, while the Feds tried institutional psychiatry on him.

Newspaper Roles

Mencken began his newspaper career in February, 1899, as a cub reporter for the Baltimore *Morning Herald*. Within five years he had literally and figuratively not only covered the waterfront, he had also blanketed the entire Baltimore scene in his varied roles as police reporter, central city reporter, court reporter, desk reporter, drama critic, rewrite man, city editor, managing editor, and finally as the *Herald's* chief editor.

One of Mencken's most memorable adventures, journalistic and personal, occurred with his coverage of the great February, 1904, fire which gutted many blocks in Baltimore's downtown district, including the *Herald* building. Except for short naps, Mencken didn't sleep for three days and nights until the fires and their subsidiary events were brought under some semblance of control. Because of lack of hotel rooms, he took his rest in a local bordello. Mencken claimed afterward that at the outset of this brief, heady experience, he was a mere strip of a lad, but when it was over, he was a spavined old man.

For a time the paper was published in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and other localities before its owners secured another permanent Baltimore site. His precipitous rise to local fame reached a temporary plateau when the *Morning Herald* closed in 1906 for financial reasons.

Charlatanry of the Learned

A proud German-American, Mencken had undergone much stress and repression for taking Germany's side prior to America's entry into World War

I. He felt relieved and vindicated to find out, in 1920, that he had imposing academic ancestors who possessed copious allotments of humor and profound understandings of the human predicament.

On January 16, 1658, the will of Eilard Mencken was probated. The will provided all male Menckenii with a university education. The first beneficiary of the “Stipendium” seems to have been Lüder Mencken, from whom H. L. Mencken traced his direct ancestry. In 1929 Eilard Mencken’s German heirs expanded the family scholarship to include all female Mencken intent on pursuing a degree. None of the American Menckens took advantage, or even possibly knew, of the German Mencken Stipendium. The Napoleonic wars ended the line of Mencken scholars at Leipzig, Halle, Helmstedt, and Wittenberg: it also seemed to wipe out the supreme achievement of Johann Burkhard Mencken (JBM).

H. L. Mencken (HLM) was a lateral descendant and a subcutaneous brother of Johann Burkhard Mencken (1674-1732). JBM, along with many other German male Menckens, took advantage of Eilard’s will. JBM became a historian and author of several books, including the epic work, *The Charlatanry of the Learned*, published in 1715.

When first published, *The Charlatanry of the Learned* was outlawed by the constituted Leibnitz authorities. However, its suppression caused countless pirated editions to blossom and spread over into other European languages. Johann’s fabulous success with this book was due to its joyful lambasting of major European mountebanks, quacks, and renegades, mainly of the Middle Ages. The book and its author drew the extreme displeasure—yea, the wrath—of both secular and ecclesiastical authorities of this era. It ripped into the nefarious mountebankerries and hypocritical doings of actors, physicians, writers, scholars, ecclesiastics, philosophers, grammarians, poets, historians, linguists, pedagogues, sycophants, impostors, lawyers, orators, rhetoricians, rulers, despots, tyrants, logicians, metaphysicians and other *pediculae* from Johann Mencken’s era back to the dawn of time.

The book went through many editions in various European languages. It was very effective in highlighting mankind’s many foibles. HLM was overjoyed to learn that a famous family member had taken Europe by storm, using the same bombastic, iconoclastic approach he was soon to master.

It was not too long until the Baltimore Sage came into his own, making his indelible impact on the American literary and journalistic scene.

Mencken assigned Catholic University Professor Francis E. Litz the

task of translating *Charlatanry* from the German. H. L. Mencken inserted forty-three meticulous footnotes and a forty-five page introduction to the 1937 English edition of Johann Mencken's *The Charlatanry of the Learned*. A Horatioan aphorism, "*Ridendo dicere verum quid vetat?*" (What hindered one from laughing when speaking the truth?) became the book's basic theme. [Nietzsche in his 1888 book, *The Case of Wagner*, used a variation of Horace's Satires, I.24: "*Ridendo dicere severum*" (Through what is laughable say what is somber).]

HLM's gleeful comments on JBM's masterful work stated:

I was forty years old before I ever read it, or any other of [Johann] Mencken's writings. I may be pardoned, I hope, for recording that it astonished me, and no little delighted me, to find that a man of my name, nearly two hundred years in his grave, had devoted heartedly to an enterprise that had engaged me day in and day out in a far country—tracking down the quacks of all sorts and the appreciative exhibition of their multifarious tricks to catch coneys. Nor was my delight lessened when I noted that the quacks he had thus labored in eighteenth century Europe were still flourishing mightily in the twentieth century America, along with many reinforcements that he had never dreamed.¹¹

A joyful H. L. Mencken inserted these comments on Richard Treitschke (1834-1896) on Johann B. Mencken:

Mencken's spirit showed an extraordinary and cheerful clarity; his education is best described as harmonious. He had a solid Thomistic grounding, but was a warm friend of classical literature, and had an excellent taste. He was thoroughly learned, and yet a relentless foe of pedantry; he was German to the extent of hating the French, but he had a keen eye for whatever was good in France; he was, finally, a monarchist in politics, and yet a free spirit . . . He was genuinely religious, but revealed not the slightest trace of pietism or intolerance. . . . He was a mild and placid man, moderate without envy, philanthropic, charitable. . . . Altogether, he was a small picture of his time, and on its most striking and delightful side.¹²

Treitschke's delightful account of Johann B. Mencken invites comparison with his latter-day descendant, H. L. Mencken. Each embodied much of the other's mental makeup and characteristics. Is the American Mencken positive proof of the validity of the Lamarckian theory of inherited characteristics? [Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) was a pre-Darwinian evolutionist.] Lamarck's theory has not been accepted by the scientific community, but it persists and continues to assert its obtrusive nature, with the Mencken heritage as a prime example of going against the grain of conventional biological thinking.

The Mencken clan, including HLM, were advocates of genuine law and order. However, they were ever ready to question the legitimacy of the law when the law deviated from its source or became oppressive, particularly when functionaries abused the law for their own benefit. A comparison between Johann and H. L., based on Treitschke's critique, is worth exploring. Both men demonstrated extraordinary and cheerful clarity. The Sage ended his career with his 1956 book, *Minority Report*, with this forceful, concise critique of his overall writings:

The imbeciles who have printed acres of comments on my books have seldom noticed the chief character of my style. It is that I write with almost scientific precision—that my meaning is never obscure. The ignorant have often complained that my vocabulary is beyond them, but it is simply because my ideas cover a wider range than theirs do. Once they have consulted the dictionary they always know exactly what I intended to say. I am as far as any writer can get from the muffled sonorities of, say, John Dewey.¹³

Treitschke described JBM's education as harmonious. HLM's education was eclectic, combining prodigious amounts of self-imposed reading, a never-ending journalistic pursuit, a vivid, street-smart, real-life background with a wide-ranging study of the human predicament, minus metaphysical yearnings. HLM saw the tie-in between Aristotle's and Aquinas's philosophies, not as the embodiment of truth, but as a viable method for affirming good fantasies that might make life more bearable. JMB was thoroughly learned: HLM had a lot more knowledge to assimilate. As a result, there were gaps in his knowledge, mostly of a metaphysical nature.

Both Menckens were unswerving foes of pedantry. JMB was a serene

man whose politics were monarchist. HLM was a German-American to the extent of alternately praising and criticizing the British, but he had a keen eye for whatever was good in England. He used the same techniques and/or procedures for his many controversial and yet enlightening comments on The Chosen. HLM was a Tory advocate who enjoyed democratic high jinks, and yet was an ultra-free-spirited proponent of the good life. JBM was genuinely religious, without being intolerant or pietistic. HLM was a confirmed agnostic who was deeply interested in religious issues and dogmas. His relentless pursuit of theology led him to write two scholarly books on religion and ethics.

Young HLM was verbose, and loud and sassy in his public postures, but his real persona was embodied in a deferential personality, especially in dealings with women. HLM was totally devoid of envy and rancor. Both men were striking and delightful characters of their respective times.

Mencken and Nietzsche

Between 1899 and 1920, Mencken's meteoric writing career made him a potent force as a journalist, editor, author, and critic. During this ascendant period, Mencken went out of his way to escape being typed as a pedagogue, an academician, or a didactic, serious thinker. He aspired to acquire a reputation as a carefree, liberated spirit, intent on writing laughingly on matters that were of serious concern to others. With George Jean Nathan, his *Smart Set* co-editor from 1914 to 1923, he combined to put out a series of short, clever books, mocking life and daring the Fates to do their damndest. His 1908 book, *The Philosophy of F. W. Nietzsche*, caused Mencken to fret that he would be considered a serious pedant.

Although he often lampooned Nietzsche, Mencken's reverence for the German philologist turned bombastic philosopher always surfaced, despite his many digs at Nietzschean mysticism and Nietzsche's alleged follies. This can be verified by perusing his innumerable references to the German from 1908 through 1923. Nietzsche again became part of the Mencken scenario when the Baltimore Bard chose to write *Treatise on Religion* (1930) and *Treatise on Right and Wrong* (1934). Nietzsche's "Eternal Recurrence" construct made for the complete embodiment of life cycles which both men used to justify life, no matter how pernicious and dangerous it may be.

Nietzsche primarily used ironic wit, thunderous imprecations,

diabolical diatribes, and ultra-powerful anathemas in his all too short but very incisive attempts to alert mankind to the perils of its precarious existence. Belatedly, Europe is trying to absorb and heed the many powerful Nietzschean messages while America is ensconced in an advanced stage of deep sleep. Mencken was a supreme exponent of using ridicule, humor, parody, debunking, and outrageous laughter to highlight the nation's awesome shortcomings in all realms of acting and thinking. Mencken and Nietzsche were devastating foes of all forms of blatant hypocrisy. They highly prized rugged individualism and strongly opposed all forms of collectivistic governmental and religious tyrannies.

Mencken, Veblen, and Wilson

Mencken linguistically annihilated Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), the Wisconsin-born social scientist and member of the teaching staff at the University of Chicago. Veblen's writings contain many keen criticisms of established social and economic institutions.

Other favorite Mencken pedantic targets of his era included Columbia University savant John Dewey and Columbia University President and 1916 Republican Presidential candidate Charles Evans Hughes, who thought he had won the Presidency over Woodrow Wilson, only to find out the next day that he had lost one of the closest Presidential elections in history (shades of Thomas Dewey's 1948 defeat, Al Gore's 2000 controversial Supreme Court decision and John Kerry's election box fiascos).

Mencken's favorite teacher target was the dour Presbyterian President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924). In 1882, Wilson received his University of Virginia law degree and set up practice in Georgia. His law career was an unmitigated disaster: His only client was his mother. In 1883 Wilson enrolled in Johns Hopkins graduate school, taught at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, and in the interim earned his Ph.D. in political science from Johns Hopkins University. In 1902, Wilson was appointed president of Princeton University. New Jersey voters elected him governor in 1910, and two years later Wilson became twenty-eighth President of the United States, serving from 1913 to 1921. Wilson's first wife, Ellen L. Axson, after rearing three daughters, died in 1914. The following year, Wilson married the buxom-bosomed widow Edith Bolling Galt who monopolized most of his time.

President Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke in 1920 while out West

campaigning for his beleaguered League of Nations proposal. Mrs. Edith Bolling Wilson assumed dictatorial control, passing judgment as to who was to see the stricken Wilson and which issues were to be brought to his attention. Here is the most blatant case of an unmitigated gynecocracy (rule by women) in United States history. The Founding Fathers would have deplored Mrs. Wilson II's actions as brutal usurpations of electoral and Constitutional processes.

In his book, *My Life as Author and Editor*, edited by Jonathan Yardley, Mencken delightfully devoted three paragraphs to Bertha Bolling, sister of Wilson's second wife.

I was also interested in Bertha Bolling, a dainty, Dresden china, little old maid who was the sister of Mrs. Edith Bolling Galt who married Woodrow Wilson on December 18, 1915. She sent me a short poem called "Yellow" early in 1916 and we printed it in the *Smart Set* for March. In the form in which I first saw it, it was amateurish and feeble stuff but Miss Bolling gave me permission to omit its last stanza and to edit it a bit, and so I made it printable. It was surely no great shakes even then, but Nathan and I were amused by the stunt of publishing Wilson's sister-in-law, and we encouraged her to send in more. She did so from time to time until her health broke down in 1921, and we took a piece occasionally.

. . . . Some time in 1917 she had invited me to dinner at her Washington apartment, then in the Powhatan Hotel. The only other persons present were her mother and her brother. The talk ran naturally on the war, and the two ladies gave me to understand that they agreed with my view of it, not with Wilson's. In fact, they spent most of the evening telling me of the happy days they had once spent in Munich, and praising the German Culture. It was easy to see that they were not especially proud of their daughter and sister's marriage to Wilson.¹⁴

Mencken based this conclusion on the Bolling clan's claimed descent from Pocahontas: they were Tidewater Virginians (indeed, members of First Families of Virginia) as opposed to President Wilson, who was the son of a Presbyterian preacher from Staunton, in the sterile western part of the state. Mencken could not figure out why the "petite in figure and very graceful" Bertha did not want or could not collar a husband. Perhaps Mencken had more

than a little romantic interest in Bertha Bolling.

In 1910, using Theodore Dreiser's good will and his *Delineator* publishing facilities, Mencken collaborated with Leonard K. Hirshberg, a Jewish doctor, to ghost-write a witty book, *What You Ought to Know About Your Baby*. This scintillating book was reissued and updated in 1991 by Howard Markel, M.D., and Frank A. Oski, M.D. It had created a lot of interest among pediatricians and mothers; the book enabled doctors and other interested persons to compare how professional baby care was practiced around 1910 and its relationship to modern pediatric practices. In this medical tome, Mencken attained a nice rollicking rhythm that continued to gain in strength and self-assurance. Mencken's "messianic" message seems to be validated when he stated,

The baby is stronger and more resilient than all of us— parents and professionals— put together.

A very emphatic Mencken commented on the Chosen in his April 30, 1931 letter to Roscoe Peacock, an acidic conservative, subscription agency owner:

It seems to me that you are generalizing from very small evidence. Certainly, it would be absurd to say that the kind of Jews you meet aboard ship were the only kind of Jews in existence. Some of the most intelligent people in America are Jews and not only some of the most intelligent, but some of the most charming. My own feeling is, that taking one with another, Jews average much higher than Americans. However, I agree with you that the unpleasant ones are unpleasant almost beyond endurance.

As for his alleged affiliations with the Nazis, in a June 5, 1935 letter to Theodore Dreiser, Mencken stated:

... God knows what the Nazis are up to. They seem to be a gang of lunatics to me. I hear that I am also on their Blacklist. Whether they think of me of being a Jew I don't know. Every now and then I am listed among some Jews in some European papers when this happened a year ago. . . I had no means of reaching the Nazis directly. I don't know a single man among them and all my friends in Germany seem to be in