



VINTAGE

Albert Camus

Olivier Todd

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About the Book

Albert Camus is among the most significant French writers of the twentieth century. His novels, *The Plague* and *The Outsider*, have a timeless power and appeal and are studied all over the world, and his philosophical work has had an enduring influence. Oliver Todd has been authorised by Camus' family to write the definitive life.

Opening with his impoverished childhood in Algiers, Todd brings the historical context to life, shedding light on Camus' later agonising conflict between sympathy for the working class Algerians and for the French colonials with a stake in their adopted land. His was a life of impossible choices and perpetual struggle, from his intimacy with the Gallimard family, despite their collaborationist activities, and his involvement in the conflict between Satre and de Beauvoir; to his own battles with debilitating bouts of tuberculosis and the passionate, restless nature that would never let him settle.

With an extraordinary grasp of both his subject and his times, Todd brings to this rich, generous biography a rare immediacy and perception, evoking a great writer and his world with memorable force and engaging subtlety.

About the Author

Olivier Todd was educated at the Sorbonne and Cambridge, and is a journalist and award winning writer. He is the author of several acclaimed books; *Albert Camus: A Life* is his third biography. He lives in Paris.

Olivier Todd

ALBERT CAMUS

A Life

TRANSLATED BY
Benjamin Ivry

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Translator's Note

The present book is an abridged and edited English version of Olivier Todd's biography of Albert Camus, which was published in France in 1996. While all relevant information about the life and work of Albert Camus has been retained, some material not of sufficient interest to the British and American general reader has been omitted to improve the narrative flow. Anyone seeking more background detail can, of course, consult the original French. The notes at the end of the French edition have also been deleted. While one of the virtues of Todd's book is his energetic research, in order to keep this edition an accessible length we decided to integrate necessary information into the text rather than including the extensive documentation of sources. Again, scholars can turn to the French edition for a full accounting.

I wish to thank Richard Howard for his shining dedication and inspiration at a number of literary tasks, translation among them. At Alfred A. Knopf, Judith Jones provided wise counsel, and she was ably assisted by Kenneth Schneider.

—Benjamin Ivry

Preface

The author of *L'Etranger*, never forgetting that he was the noted writer Camus, protected his family and private life. He kept an eye out for the devourer hidden behind every biographer. When critics like Jean-Claude Brisville, Germaine Brée, Roger Quilliot, and Carl Viggiani questioned him about his life, he told them very little.

In 1978, the pioneering biographer Herbert Lottman depicted Camus the man. I've also attempted to describe him as such, without forgetting that he was a writer. During research in France, Czechoslovakia, and Italy, in conversations with people from France, Algeria, America, and England, while exploring public and private archives, as well as colonial files in Aix and Komintern reports in Moscow, I've often had the feeling of trying to walk across the horizon. Camus used to say, "There is no true creation without secrecy."

This book is entitled *Albert Camus: A Life*, meaning the one that I've written. A hundred biographies are possible for every human being. I hope to have revealed the important moments and personalities of one life. I have also based the book partly on eyewitness accounts. Any literary personality has real enemies during his life and as many false friends afterwards. Historians, judges, and biographers run up against the fragility of eyewitness accounts. Thirty-five years after Camus's death, it was time to take stock. Certain of his intimate friends weren't known at all or were only slightly known until now. Before Francine Camus's death on December 24, 1979, decency also imposed a certain reserve.

Camus showed Quilliot a typed version of some of his diaries—"the backstage of a work," Quilliot remarked. I've

used the *Carnets*, but sometimes I feel that Camus wrote them with posterity looking over his shoulder, not the way Gide wrote his succulent *Journals*, but rather with the discretion of Johnson explaining himself to Boswell.

Nevertheless, Camus did not write in code when he put down his observations, thoughts, and adventures, as did Pepys and Hugo. In his letters, the reader is drawn to center stage. I have had the luck of discovering unpublished letters, where an unexpected Camus appears. The authenticity of a letter isn't proof of whether it is sincere. But a letter without too much literary veneer does give the feelings, ideas, and information that a writer wants to convey to its recipient.

Camus once said, "The idea that every writer ... portrays himself in his books is one of the puerilities bequeathed to us by Romanticism. A man's works often describe his longings or temptations, and almost never his own true story." Nevertheless, apart from his successes in artistic transposition, Camus's work is highly autobiographical. Roger Grenier, who knew him, spoke about the writer's "masks."

In 1959 Camus was asked which part of his work critics had neglected. He replied, "The obscure part, what is blind and instinctive in me. French critics are mainly interested in ideas." This rough generalization also describes Camus in the rich French literary, philosophical, and political turmoil from 1930 to 1960.

At age twenty, he wrote, "Just as after a writer's death we exaggerate the importance of his work, so an individual's death makes us overestimate his personal importance to us." France makes a habit of hagiographic elegies, but later, for years on end, the dear departed may be regularly assassinated.

In his first novel, published eleven years after his death, Camus described a character: "He wanted to hold his life in his hands, like a warm piece of bread that you squeeze and

knead." A biography is only an *essay*. I have attempted to discern the gestures, hands, and heart of a working writer and to give his different voices back to Camus.

Chapter One

Matriculation Number 17.032

ON SEPTEMBER 22, 1913, on the Saint-Paul Farm outside the city of Mondovi in Algeria, Lucien Auguste Camus wrote to his employer, "The grape harvest at Saint-Paul ended this morning at 10 a.m." Mondovi is 420 kilometers west of Algiers, and Lucien Camus worked there for the Ricôme wine company as a cellarman. He lived on the farm in a low-built house with a clay floor, two rooms and a kitchen next to the wine cellars.

In the production of wine, vineyard owners reigned at the top of the economic ladder. Then came the estate managers; the directors of grape growing, who supervised the vines; and the cellarman, who worked with the grapes after harvest. White laborers were used for disbudding, pruning, and wine pressing. "Native" workers lived around the farms in tents that clung to hovels made of wooden planks. Day workers might be local tribesmen and prison laborers, who returned to jail after each day's work. Europeans and Arabs worked side by side, but they had little social contact, except at the bordello in nearby Bône, the hometown of Saint Augustine.

Once Lucien Camus recommended an Arab worker who wanted to change jobs: in his letter of reference for this laborer, named Rabad Oustani, who had refused to sabotage wine production despite orders from a French supervisor, Lucien wrote, "Although he is a native, he has much more knowhow than the ignoble individual who

urged him to sabotage the filtering of the wine during the night. Because he refused to do it, he had to quit his job.”

Born in 1885 at Ouled-Fayet, outside Algiers, Lucien Camus was a descendant of the first generation of Frenchmen to settle in Algeria. He was not a rich colonist, but a simple salaried foreman. In his professional notes, the cellarman would sometimes include a literary touch—for instance, during the very hot summer of 1913 he wrote, “The birds are silenced ... by the heat, and the wine tastes like a heated pond.”

The vineyard employee Lucien Auguste Camus, twenty-eight years old, had blue eyes, brown hair, and a mustache. He measured five feet six inches, which was then above average height. He had served with the Zouave regiment in Morocco as a second-class soldier in 1907 and 1908. His military papers described him as a “coach driver.”

Orphaned at the age of one, he had been placed by his siblings in an orphanage. One of his grandfathers had come from the Bordeaux region, and a great-grandfather was from the Ardèche in France. The Camuses had a family legend that they were from Alsace, no doubt because in Algeria, a political refugee from Alsace had more prestige than a poor immigrant from Bordeaux.

On November 13, 1910, Lucien Auguste had married Catherine Hélène Sintès, who was three years older than he, and three months later their first son, Lucien Jean Etienne, was born. In autumn 1913, Catherine Hélène and her small son traveled for eighteen hours by train from Algiers en route to Bône. After the long train ride, on wooden seats, the pregnant woman and her son were packed into a wagon that carted trunks and furniture to Saint-Paul.

Shortly after his family arrived, Lucien Camus wrote to a colleague at the Ricôme company, “Things aren’t going well at home, the little boy and his mother have fevers, bad luck, but they’re a little better the last two days.” Malaria,

a constant threat, was borne by the wind blown over from nearby putrid swamps and the stagnant Lake Fetzara. Only fifty years before, an epidemic of cholera and plague had killed half the colonists.

Lucien also had difficulties with his workers. He was “twice physically threatened by a native driver.” And he was bothered by Europeans who lived in Bône, writing in a letter on June 24, 1914: “It’s true that all these people from Bône seem as sweet as lambs, but deep down they’re deceitful and treacherous as foxes.” When business obliged him to drive his cart to Mondovi, small boys would hang on to the vehicle just for a lark, and rather than using his whip to get rid of them—other drivers would have—Lucien simply cried “Emchi!”—Go away!

On November 8, 1913, Lucien Camus appeared at the mayor’s office in Mondovi to register the birth of his second son, born the day before. The baby was given only one Christian name, Albert. The two witnesses to the newly registered infant were Jean Piro, a merchant, and Salvatore Frendo, a delivery man for a local grocer.

Mondovi had been designed by military engineers, who organized the sharply rectangular city into twenty neighborhoods of twelve houses each. The city offered hunting clubs, which Lucien Camus would have enjoyed if he had had the time; he’d proved himself a good shot in military service. Silent films were shown at Mondovi, but the Camuses did not use the farm car to go into town for amusements.

Lucien Camus earned ten to twenty francs a day, not much more than a common laborer. He complained to his supervisor at Ricôme wines, M. Classiault, that the manager of the Saint-Paul Farm “didn’t hide his displeasure that Ricôme is only buying 131 barrels.” When Classiault reacted angrily towards the disgruntled manager, Camus, aware that employees had guns and would use them if provoked, warned his boss, “I beg you not to make a big

deal about it, and not to threaten him, because this fellow is capable of anything."

Around Algeria, there were debates over France's role in the country's future, and what rights the Arabs should have. A month after Albert's birth, the daily *LEcho d'Alger* published a series of articles by a professor of law, Emile Chauvin. He declared that France's purpose in Algeria was "to substitute civilization and reason for barbarity and fanaticism, and to aim for the assimilation, the unification of the races," in order to make them as French as possible. Frenchmen like Chauvin believed that in the very distant future, natives *might* be transformed into citizens of the French Republic. For the time being, declared Chauvin, France "intends to energetically maintain the principle of French supremacy, by not allowing native, non-French advisers to participate in mayoral elections.... We cannot accept the idea of giving French citizenship and thereby political rights to men who persist in thinking and acting outside of all our legal and moral strictures."

Lucien Camus was much too occupied as cellarman to get involved in such debates. He noted to his employer in the winter of 1913, "I sent out 1,553 full barrels, but got back only 1,543 empty barrels.... Something suspicious may happen before the season's work is over.... I have to stand guard during the day and part of the night."

The new year began badly. On January 4, 1914, he noted, "I plan to move, when the weather is good ... we've had torrential rains here for several days.... You can't even wash the barrels, there is so much mud all over."

That spring Lucien received a draft notice from the French army, but his employer tried to intervene to have his military service postponed until the quiet season in winemaking. Catherine and their two sons, three-year-old Lucien and eight-month-old Albert, were threatened by malaria. On July 14, the cellarman wrote to Classiault, "I

plan to move my family to Algiers at the end of the month, for health reasons.”

Finally called up to the First Zouave Regiment, Lucien was just in time for Germany’s declaration of war on France on August 3. Wearing the Zouave uniform—a fez, billowing red pants, and a blue vest—the dashing Lucien had the matriculation number 17.032.

His regiment was sent overseas in a crowded ship, the *Lamarsa*. The soldiers lived on a diet of beans and beef, and after a few hours at sea the ship stank of vomit. They landed at the southern French city of Sète. From there, the troops traveled in boxcars to Narbonne, got off at Massy-Palaiseau, crossed Paris, and then looked for the German foe.

The Zouaves’ red-and-blue uniforms made them an easy target for German Maxim machine guns, and Lucien Camus was among the first French soldiers wounded in the bloody Battle of the Marne. From the town of Montreuil-sous-Bois, Lucien sent his wife, who had returned to Algiers on August 30, a postcard that showed a municipal fountain in the city of Noisy-le-Sec. The message read, “A big kiss for you and the children and hello to my friends. Send me your news, my health and news are all fine, no worries.”

A few days later he sent another card from Saint-Brieuc in Brittany, showing a school that had been transformed into a makeshift army hospital. One window was marked with an X, with the message, “My dear Hélène, I’m sending you a picture of the hospital where I’m being treated, just above the X. Kiss the children for me, Your husband.”

Lucien did not write this card himself, and he died of his wounds on October 11, 1914. Of the 1,357,000 Frenchmen killed in the First World War, Algeria contributed 25,000 Frenchmen and 22,000 Arabs who had served in the French army. Of these, fifty casualties came from Mondovi, including twelve Arabs.

Lucien Camus's body was never sent home to Algeria. Instead, the French bureaucratic system sent his widow the dead soldier's military passbook, marked as having served in "the German campaign from August 28 to October 11, 1914."

Lucien had spent a tenth of his short life in the army. As the first man in the life of his son, he would be the one Albert knew least. He left behind a few documents and sepia photographs, his posthumous war medal, and some shrapnel from the shell that killed him. They were sent to his widow by the staff of the Saint-Brieuc hospital where he died.

Albert and his father, Lucien, had lived together for only eight months.

Chapter Two

“Mosquito, You’ve Been Accepted.”

ON MAY 7, 1921, Catherine Hélène Sintès-Camus was informed by the French Pension Ministry that as a war widow, she was entitled to eight hundred francs per year, plus three hundred francs for each of her children until they reached the age of eighteen. At the time, a cleaning woman earned one thousand francs a year.

As war orphans, Lucien and Albert were entitled to free medical treatment. During the war, their mother had worked in a factory, stacking cartridges in boxes. The workers earned up to five francs per day, but now the widow Camus worked as a cleaning woman in private homes and businesses, such as the butcher shop on the rue de Lyon in Algiers. She lived in her mother’s apartment with her brothers, Etienne and Joseph, and her two sons.

The children, Lucien and Albert, felt that their grandmother talked too much, and their mother not enough. Camus’s mother came from a family of Spanish origin, from Minorca. Dark, small, and partly deaf, she could neither read nor write. Although she was able to read lips, some people thought her mute, or mentally retarded. Others thought that she was suffering from badly treated meningitis. Albert believed that his mother began to have hearing and speech problems after a bout of typhoid fever or typhus. Still others thought she had had a cerebral attack upon hearing about her husband’s death. She would slide over certain words, hissing instead of pronouncing sounds like *s* or *z*, and say “coucou” when she meant to say

“couscous.” She would use her hands to express herself, joining them to imply that a man and woman were having a love affair.

Present and yet distant, this terrified woman would not intervene with the children in the way Camus’s grandmother did. Nor would she complain when an aunt snubbed her. Catherine Hélène, known in the family by her second name, would neither laugh nor cry in front of her family, maintaining a steady smile on her face. When Lucien and Albert quarreled, she would only say, “I doan like arguments, I doan like fights.”

She had red, rheumatic hands and wore black or gray blouses all year long. She would lean on her elbow on the windowsill, watching the street through the potted geraniums. In spring and summer, she took a chair out to the sidewalk and listened to the neighbors’ gossip.

Later, the family moved further down the rue de Lyon, from number 17 to number 93, in the heart of Belcourt, a working-class quarter in east Algiers, on the border of the Arab quarter, Marabout. On the ground floor of the house were a barber, a wine seller, and a milliner. Behind the building was an orange tree and a rickety shack where the barber lived, along with the Arab family of a street sweeper, whose son, Omar, played with Albert.

The Sintès-Camus home was a three-room apartment with a long corridor. The name of the grandmother, Madame Sintès, was on the lease. She occupied one room. The main room, whitewashed, had a table, a desk, a sideboard, and a mattress on the floor, hidden by a covering. Albert and Lucien’s uncle Etienne, who was partially mute, slept there. Hélène and her two sons shared the third room, which was crowded with a mirrored wardrobe, two iron bedframes—a single for the mother, a double for the boys—and a night table between them. A net covering was draped over a fiber trunk. Etienne’s brother, Joseph, also lived in the apartment until 1920, and at one

point a woman cousin named Minette slept in the hallway for some months.

On the landings the Turkish toilets—a hole with a drain—stank. There was no electricity or running water, and jugs of water had to be fetched from street faucets. Everyone washed in the kitchen sink and once a week took a shower in a zinc tub. Above a table in the main room was an oil lamp.

Grandmother kept her coins in a biscuit tin, as no one in the family had a bank account. On New Year's Day 1921, Grandmother explained to Albert that now that he was "grown up," he would be getting practical gifts from now on. Grandmother and Mother would get up early to do the marketing, stopping to gossip with the delicatessen owner, as the trolley's early morning runs along the rue de Lyon made the house shake.

Catherine Hélène prepared dishes like jugged hare, and snails with oil. She would wait patiently, while the snails disgorged, simmering her sauce of lard, onions, tomatoes, and pepper. One of the children took the prepared dishes over to the butcher's to get them cooked.

Grocery stores sold tomatoes, figs, melons ripened in the sun, and fat, juicy Algerian apricots, while fishmongers offered sea bream and mullet. On Thursdays and Sundays, Hélène would prepare desserts, flavoring pastries with lemon and orange blossom, while the boys hovered around the kitchen. Their grandmother would yell at them, but never sent them outside, because she didn't want them "hanging around."

The mother's life was one of silence and work. She never remarried, although in 1930 she did have one suitor, Antoine, a Maltese fishmonger, a handsome, mustached man who wore a bowler hat. She put on makeup and a bright smock, but Etienne made a scene—the typical North African European protecting his sister. When Hélène cut

her hair, her mother called her a whore. She wasn't given a chance to remarry.

Etienne used to hang out at a café near the house, where he would drink anisette, a drink that according to a local saying "rolled off the tongue like the piss of Baby Jesus." As Etienne gossiped and played cards, his nephew Albert learned the rules of the French card game *belote*. In Belcourt, on the left bank, lived the humble French people of Algiers. They were joyous, generous, vain, quarrelsome, quickly excited and as quickly discouraged. The lower-level French laborers of Belcourt often despised their Arab neighbors, but at the same time they felt inferior to the ruling class of French civil servants, who could afford to take vacations back in France.

In Belcourt, the lower-class French rubbed elbows with Arabs and believed they understood them, speaking in condescending generalities of "Ahmed" or "Fatma" instead of using their full Arab names. With Arabs they shared the spit-roasted lamb *méchoui* during picnics on the beach, but they would never think of receiving Arabs in their homes. Both lower-class Arabs and whites had a hatred for the police, even during a *baroufa*, the typical street brawl. The poor also feared unemployment. Arabs, Jews, Neapolitans, Spanish, Corsicans, and people from Marseilles were all accused of stealing jobs. Xenophobia flourished, with a kind of solidarity between Arabs and the poor. On the rue de Lyon, French, Arab, Italian, and Spanish accents could be heard.

Afternoon was nap time, and Albert hated having to lie next to his grandmother, with her rancid old-lady smell. Over her bed, Grandmother had hung her own portrait. With her hair in a tight bun, a chain around her neck, and clear, piercing eyes, the old lady appeared rather severe.

Her daughter and sons accepted Madame Sintès's authority, and when Grandmother whipped the boys, Catherine Hélène would just stand by, begging her not to

hit them too hard. Lucien, the elder and thus the first to be held responsible for mischief, took more beatings than his brother. Grandmother was especially fond of Albert. With some talent for histrionics, she would hide in her room, complaining of stomach aches, or ask the boys in front of guests if they preferred Mother or Grandmother. And she complained that her daughter didn't take care of her, and that her son Joseph had gone far away.

Uncle Etienne would take Albert to the Sablettes beach, where they played with the family dog, Brilliant. Etienne had a quick temper, and he no longer spoke with Joseph, who called him "a rude beast." On Thursdays, Albert helped Uncle Etienne in his work as a barrel maker. A careful craftsman, Etienne was obliged to work a sixty-hour week. Once he deliberately cut the palm of his hand and got sick leave.

Uncle Joseph had a better job, working for the railroad, and was married to a piano teacher. As a railway employee, Joseph could travel around the countryside free, buying chickens and rabbits from farmers and reselling them, or giving some to his mother to raise in her courtyard.

Madame Sintès decided that Albert had become a man on the day he helped her kill one of their chickens. Etienne agreed that the boy "had courage," compared with big brother Lucien, who had refused to kill the fowl. But Madame Sintès was usually strict: when Albert hurt a finger by getting it pinched in a seat at school and the blood was flowing freely, his grandmother gave him a whipping for disturbing the household.

The family's favorite entertainment was going to the Musset cinema, next door, or the Alcazar, nearby on the rue de l'Union. Albert was embarrassed to have to read aloud the silent film titles for his illiterate mother and grandmother. To cover up, his grandmother would say loudly, "I've left my eyeglasses at home, so you'll have to read them to me."

Although Lucien was a friendly and sociable boy, he was a less gifted student than Albert, but was more talented at soccer. Lucien would look after Albert, sharing boxes of coconut candy with him. At the age of fourteen, Lucien was hired as a messenger at the Ricôme wine company, with a starting salary of eighty francs per month.

In 1923, Albert went to the boys' primary school on the rue Aumerat, a ten-minute walk from the rue de Lyon apartment. Students wore charcoalgray blouses, like the teachers, and had to ask permission to sit down. It was a typical French school of the Third Republic. In winter, fires were lit in cast-iron stoves. Each wooden desk had an inkwell containing a purple ink, into which the children dipped their old-fashioned steel pen nibs. Blackboards, cluttered with white, pink, and blue pieces of chalk, were side by side on the wall with Vidal de La Blache's geographical maps, representing France and its Algerian colony in the same color. The standard world atlas, Schroeder and Galouedec's, colored the entire French empire a uniform light purple. On the classroom walls there were also photographs of the cathedrals of Strasbourg and Notre-Dame de Paris and the Mont-Blanc—parts of a country that to the Algerians of Belcourt seemed like a paradise with its châteaux, kings, and revolutionaries.

Classes in history, geography, and civics hammered into the students the idea of France as a maternal power. In 1923, the second-year courses were run by an established instructor, Louis Germain. Tall and stiff, with precise pronunciation, Germain played the clarinet as an amateur, but he followed the musical score so strictly that some listeners said, "All Germain knows is the metronome markings." The teacher used to slap unruly students and spank their bottoms with what he called his "barley sugar," a fat ruler made of red wood. Unyielding about spelling, punctuation, arithmetic, and composition, Germain would

organize contests of mental arithmetic and give twice-monthly slide shows about geography and natural history to his rapt students. A relative free-thinker, he would tell his students that some people practiced no religion at all. As a social progressive, Louis Germain was aware of the Socialist leader Jules Ferry's famous "Letter to Teachers," in which he said that teachers "replace fathers of families." During the four years of World War I, Germain would read aloud in class a novel about trench warfare by Roland Dorgelès, *Les Croix de bois*, which described bayonet attacks, the wounded, and war's horror. He later told Albert, "I've always considered your poor father as a personal friend," although the men had never met.

At Belcourt, a few young Arabs were admitted into primary school, and in Germain's second-year class, out of thirty-three students, only three were Arabs. Germain wanted Albert to continue his studies into high school, seeing that his student was happy in class, but did not realize how poor he was. He would tell Albert later, "Your pleasure at being in class was always apparent, and your face was so optimistic that looking at it, I never guessed your family's real situation. I only had a clue when your mother came to see me about entering your name on the list of scholarship candidates."

Grandmother was against scholarships for Albert, feeling that he should work for his living the way Lucien did. But with Catherine Hélène's encouragement, Germain explained about the boy's skill in reading, writing, and the spoken word, and that the scholarship would pay for a high-school diploma, after which Albert could get a better job.

Albert was a good student, especially in French. Starting in January 1924, Germain, who had lots of free time because he had separated from his wife, gave two free hours of supplementary lessons every day for four students, including Albert, who had ranked first in his class the

month before. Once he was a scholarship candidate, Albert was treated with more respect at the apartment on the rue de Lyon. Germain also spoke to Albert on his grandmother's behalf, saying that her bark was worse than her bite.

In school, the boy discovered the world of words, as there were no books at home. On Thursdays and Sundays, when there was no school, Albert would walk by his friend Pierre Fassina's house and the boys would go tree climbing in Essai Park. Young Camus had the reputation of being a brawler: when one schoolmate took him to be Alsatian and called him a *boche*, an insulting French term for a German, Albert insisted on having a fistfight with the boy and gave him a black eye. Pierre and Albert would roam through the streets, wearing espadrilles with holes in them, cotton pants, and sweaters. In the spring the friends, along with brother Lucien, would attend soccer matches, often preceded by a parade with a marching band.

The working people of Belcourt admired priests less than they did teachers. Albert had been baptized, and was confirmed at the Church of Saint Bonaventura in Algiers, but no one in his family was a churchgoer. There was never any talk of hell, paradise, or purgatory, and when somebody died, Grandmother would say, "Well, he's farted his last...."

Religious observance was limited in Belcourt, but still, most burials were under the auspices of the church. The Algerian parish priests rattled off the catechism, inspiring guilt in their young students. The priests stressed the subject of impurity, that masturbation would cause deafness and sometimes blindness or insanity, too. From the Belcourt point of view, the Catholic Church seemed definitely on the side of the rich.

Madame Sintès did insist, however, that Albert have his first communion before entering high school. When Albert talked during catechism class, he was slapped by the priest, which he remembered far longer than the lesson of

the day. After the communion ceremony, wearing a sailor suit and armband, Albert went back to school. Louis Germain later commented, "I remember your coming to class with your communion friends. You were so visibly happy and proud of the costume you were wearing and the special day you were observing that I was sincerely happy at your joy, feeling that if you took communion, it was because you wanted to...."

The anticlerical leftists in Algiers, who had gained power in 1924, plastered posters around showing Joan of Arc at the stake, being burned by cardinals and monks. The poor folk of Belcourt were not generally observant, and they were suspicious of priests. The Catholics of Spanish origin would celebrate Mardi Gras by burning a priest in effigy. When they passed a priest in the street, people would murmur "Tocaferro"—Touch iron. It was believed that church people brought bad luck. Camus was brought up on the outskirts of a superficial Catholicism. The priests in Algeria spoke of heaven, but on earth they tended to pit their parishioners against one another. To a Spanish congregation in Bab el-Oued, Spanish-language sermons denounced the French in Algeria, claiming that they did not attend mass, nor did they produce enough children. But the young people in Algeria were more concerned with the earth, the sand, the sun, and the sea.

And there was school: For the scholarship competition, Louis Germain came to pick up the candidates in Belcourt and took them to the big high school, buying them croissants to eat as encouragement. On their way out, he was waiting for them, and he studied the rough drafts of their answers. Two days later, the jury posted the results, and Albert Camus and Pierre Fassina were granted scholarships.

Louis Germain said to Camus, "Bravo, Mosquito, you've been accepted."

Chapter Three

Silence and Words

IN THE BED they shared, Lucien Camus slept against the wall so that when Albert woke up at five-thirty a.m. to go to high school, he wouldn't have to climb over his brother. With his friend Pierre Fassina, Albert would take a trolley car crowded with laborers at the rue de Lyon stop; he used to spend the half-hour trip balanced on the tram's lower step. One day he and Pierre were shocked when the passengers forced an Arab to get off the trolley because he had lice on his djellaba.

There were two high schools in Algiers, a small one in the chic Mustapha Heights neighborhood and a larger one to the south in the Bab el-Oued quarter. The snobbish students of the chic school called the larger one, which Albert attended, "the Jewish school." The disciplinary supervisor, nicknamed "the Rhinoceros," would wait for the children at the entrance to the school every morning.

Albert would arrive before seven a.m., because his scholarship for non-boarders entitled him to breakfast—coffee with milk (or sometimes hot chocolate), bread, butter, and jam—as well as lunch. Breakfast was at seven-fifteen, and classes started at eight or nine. If Albert didn't have any classes, he went to study hall. From many rooms in the school, students could see the ocean, which gave them something to dream about.

When Albert had to fill in forms about his parents' occupations, writing "domestic" to describe his mother made him know "shame, and the shame that comes from

feeling ashamed.” Whenever there were forms to be filled out by parents, Albert would bring them back blank, because his illiterate mother would not have known what to do with them.

Although he was Catholic, Albert did not want to study the catechism, but he did study Latin, which bored him. He did better in French literature, geography, natural sciences, and mathematics, thanks to the preparation of Louis Germain’s class. For the first time, Albert found himself with children from privileged families, and he noted later, “Before, everyone was like me, and poverty seemed to be utterly natural in this world, but in high school, I learned about comparisons.”

Albert played a little of the Basque sport pelota, and lots of soccer, after breakfast, during recreation period at four p.m., and before evening study hall. He got the reputation of being a good goalkeeper and center forward. He remained on the amateur level, although he did play at the Montpensier Sports Club and on the junior team of the Algiers Racing University team, the RUA. He would tackle opponents studs first and was occasionally kneed in the groin like anyone else. Once he blocked a shot by taking it full force in the chest, and fainted under the goalposts. The October 28, 1930 bulletin of the RUA soccer club congratulates his junior team after a match they lost by a score of one to nothing, adding that “the best of all was Camus, who was only beaten because of a mishap, but who gave a splendid exhibition.”

Camus was also occupied by his studies, with good results in literature but only a passing grade in maths. For years he would refer to his teachers as “masters,” but he could be insolent to them and would be given up to four hours of detention if he was rowdy. While serving detention, he would gaze at the banana trees in Marengo Park near the school, which was better than looking at the

assistant dean, M. Clérian, whose mouth the students compared to a hen's behind.

The high school was considered on the level of a good school in provincial France, and there were some outstanding teachers, such as M. Lespes, a geographer who specialized in Algeria. He would yell at lazy students, "If you don't pull your finger out in my class, I'll throw you into a Jesuit factory, and make you into good little Jesuitties!"

Another teacher, a royalist and member of the far-right-wing Action Française movement, would stand on a chair and shriek his grief over the beheading of Louis XVI during the French Revolution: "And they killed the King!"

The students got a then-standard view of colonial history, with France as benefactor, civilizer, and enlightener of its colonies. Camus also haunted the city library, where he would devour adventure stories by authors like Michel Zévaco, Jules Verne, and Alexandre Dumas, graduating from them to the more adult Honoré de Balzac. The more he would read in the large family living room, the further removed he seemed to be from the rest of his family's concerns.

When his mother and grandmother visited the school for Prize Day, they did not look like other boys' relatives. His mother wore a hat decorated with brown tulle, while his grandmother sported a black Spanish scarf, which Albert tried without success to keep her from wearing. His grandmother explained that the scarf kept her warm, and she could not afford to get sick, which shamed the boy even more.

Most of his friends did not come to the Camus family apartment on the rue de Lyon. Instead, he would visit their houses. At home, Albert was admired but little understood. Soon he was better informed than anyone else in the family, and could not easily share what he had learned at school, not even with Lucien. For all of them, a French poem had no meaning at all.

Albert had wanted to write ever since he was age seven, but still had no clear plan about how to become a writer. His family hoped he would be an elementary school teacher.

During school vacations, his grandmother could not understand why the boy was not working: "I've never had any vacations myself!" Answering a want ad, Albert got a job in a ironmonger's shop, for eight hours a day at 150 francs per month, which was more than Lucien's salary at Ricôme's office. Then he found a job with a maritime broker, where he filed mail and bills, translated lists of provisions from English into French, and visited customs officers. He liked the job at first, but then grew bored with it. After he turned over his first paycheck, his grandmother handed him back a twenty-franc coin.

Once again Albert felt *different*, as none of his school friends worked during vacation time, and some even took trips to France. Albert was humiliated, too, because he hadn't told his boss he would be leaving on September 15 to go back to school. He had to admit that he hadn't been looking for permanent employment and that he had to work during the summer because he was poor. At the office, Albert learned about administrative jobs, where one rarely saw the results of one's efforts—"this office work which comes from nowhere and ends up with nothing. Everything revolved around buying and selling, mediocre actions which were impossible to appreciate."^{fn1} His uncle Etienne's barrel workshop required skilled hands, and a new barrel could be admired or rejected. Albert developed the idea of a worker as an artisan who made an object.

During the summer at the ironmonger's, a female employee had dropped a box of pins, and when Albert crouched down to pick them up for her, he looked up and saw her knees separate underneath her dress, which affected him more than the smell of Pierre's aunt's lipstick,

or the women's hands that he brushed against in the crowded tram.

His childhood associations deepened into friendships, as Albert became more choosy. Some were French boys from Algeria, like Pierre Fassina, Claude de Fréminville, and André Belamich, while others came from France, like Georges Didier. Georges hated cursing and made Albert stop using God's name in vain. In philosophy class, Georges decided to become a Jesuit, a vocation that fascinated Albert, the nonbeliever. He saw his young friend as "seized by the absolute ... wholly involved in his loyal passions."

Young Camus's education soon became more complicated, because his earlier passion for philosophy was giving way to a love for literature.

^{fn1} From *Le Premier Homme*