In September of 1889, Kalman and Mary Sugar arrived with their two small children in a little logging village then called Superior, a whistle stop on the Soo line to Marquette. Standing in the rutted, unpaved main road, the Sugars could see a few scattered clapboard and split-log buildings separated by stretches of grassy open space and a few clumps of second-growth conifers. To the north was Waiska Bay (Kalman thought it was called Whiskey Bay), and across it lay a grey line of buildings, scaffolding, and smokestacks. That was Bay Mills, an impressive complex of sawmills connected with Superior by a long trestle. In all other directions stood dark evergreen woods. Winding out of them was a deep stream named, like the bay, for the great Chippewa leader who had conquered the Huron. Thousands of tons of timber rode its currents each spring and spilled into the bay, forming a moving island, and was then pulled toward the sawmills.

The train trip from nearby Sault Ste. Marie ended a long voyage that began on the shores of the Baltic Sea a few years before. Kalman Sugar and Maria Berman were Lithuanian Jews. In 1881, when he was twenty-three, Kalman came with his brother Isaac to Baltimore and was followed in 1884 by Mary, whom he soon wedded. Sugar was a peddler. Why he and his new wife decided to move west is not known, but Detroit's reputation as a developing commercial and manufacturing center must have influenced them. Pearl, their first child, was born there in 1886. Hard times soon pushed them on—north to the timber kingdoms of the Upper Peninsula.

Kalman first tried his hand as a traveling salesman of foodstuffs and dry goods working out of St. Ignace, where their second child, Lawrence, arrived in 1888. He peddled his wares in lumber camps and fishing towns all over the Upper Peninsula until he discovered Superior, where he immediately recognized the opportunities for a general-provisions merchant.
Maurice Sugar was thus the son of pioneers, an unusual circumstance for a U.S. Jewish radical. He was born on August 12, 1891 in the bedroom above the new store next to the railroad tracks. His mother’s dearest friend, Minnie Belanger, wife of a French Canadian lumberjack, attended her. Two years later, when Mary delivered the last Sugar child, Victor, the store was larger and a stable had been added. The town was developing rapidly, boasting two hotels, a restaurant started by Mrs. Belanger, four barbers and—a sure sign of settling down—Mme. Sordan, a dressmaker. It also had a new name, Brimley.

The town’s only immigrants from Russia remained prosperous. By 1900, the Sugars owned their place free and clear and employed a fifteen-year-old French Canadian servant girl. Also living with them was Charles Main, a Russian-born Jew and a traveling salesman. They owned two horses, one for dray and a fancier pleasure horse, Nancy, whom little Maurice loved dearly. The store itself was spacious, sported the traditional pot-bellied stove, and sold all the essentials of life in the north woods. Like all country stores, it was the gathering place for townspeople to exchange gossip and tell stories.

Maurice’s early education owed as much to his north woods experiences as it did to the formal schooling he received in Brimley’s two-room schoolhouse. A school picture reveals a sturdy nine-year-old—a son of the north. Arms folded confidently, face open and engaging, he looks healthy and happy. Sugar retained a roseate vision of those early days. Swimming in the buff in the freezing waters of the bay, spinning logs like “river hogs,” fishing for whitefish, and dozens of other outdoor activities dominated his memories. School was not a high priority, although books were important. His father read some, particularly a multivolume world history, and was reputed to have a strong knowledge of the Bible, and Mary had an abiding interest in music.

Overall, if the Brimley years did not contribute significantly to his intellectual growth, they were immensely important in defining his essential nature. Here Sugar acquired characteristics and attitudes that differentiated him from many of his left-wing intellectual friends but matched those of lots of Detroit working people. Although he did not exactly spring from the working class, the conditions of his life and the associations made in Brimley’s rough-hewn environment were certainly remote from anything that might be described as bourgeois. Sugar could think of little from those years that might have influenced his decision to become a Socialist. The only Socialist in the area was Gus Bertram, who was thought to be a little odd. But the whole experience of life in Brimley was set in a context of them versus us, and the Sugars, typical of most shopkeepers or barkeeps dependent on working-class customers, sided with labor.

The other side consisted of the International Paper Company and Hall and Munson Lumber of Manistique. Their owners lived far away and representatives were few and far between. Only two company superintendents, one bookkeeper, four sawmill engineers, and five foremen resided in Brimley. One more man
should be added to the list: J. Parsille, manager of the company store founded in 1895 by International Paper. Significantly, he was also the postmaster, the only government official in town. Rounding out the “bourgeoisie” of Brimley were a doctor, a druggist, two preachers, two schoolteachers, and a freight agent. Against this handful of gentlefolk, the census of 1900 listed 348 people who worked with their hands or catered to those who did. Brimley was a working-class town. Its main category of workers was “laborers,” meaning lumberjacks and mill hands.¹

The Waiska Valley was among the last areas in Michigan to be logged, in part because its marshy terrain produced less pine than it did “scrub” or “poppel”—balsam, cedar, hemlock, and other softwoods. The companies were perfectly happy to turn them into pulp; many real lumberjacks, who had “followed the pine” from Maine to Saginaw to Seney, moved on to the Pacific Northwest rather than waste their skills on timber that “cut like butter.”

This may explain the more settled nature of Brimley when compared to the fabled timber towns like Manistee or Seney. In contrast to Seney, for example, where they dominated the population, the itinerant bachelors who created the image of the lumberjack constituted less than a third of Brimley’s laborers. Sugar remembered many family men among the Brimley jacks. These “solid citizens” were hardly immune, however, to the delights and disasters that accompanied reentry from the long, celibate, normally abstinent, and certainly cold campaigns in the woods, for the town always burst into “sudden, wild, roaring life” at that moment.

Young Maurice was fascinated by the work and the lore of lumberjacks. Their work life had two distinct phases. First was the main work in the woodland camps during the winter, followed by the river drive after the thaw. The second covered more varied summer activities. Many jacks went to work at the sawmills for the same companies that jobbed out the logging operations in the forest. The work in the mill enthralled Maurice:

> When the floating logs reached the mill, they were steered . . . to pronged chains [that] ran up out of the water to the singing circular saws. The saws cut the logs into shortened lengths, which then were pulled upwards into a trough. Intermittently there were openings in its walls, fitted with chutes running down to the hatches of the waiting freighter. On one side of the trough were platforms upon which men stood . . . holding their pickaroons. When a log arrived at the chute, a man hitched into it and pulled it into the chute . . . Here was a fascinating operation. We kids never tired of watching it, and frequently the men let us handle their pickaroons and make a try of it. We got to be pretty good at it, even though we frequently got stuck on logs and had to let them go by.

The workingmen who made up a majority of Brimley’s population were craftsmen in one of the proudest and most demanding occupations in U.S. history. While Maurice never actually witnessed lumberjacks at work, he heard
dozens of stories about them. His sense of humor, evident in his later courtroom presentations, speeches, letters, and especially songs, owed much to these tales. Their essential characteristic was to intrigue the listener with a confusing or improbable set of circumstances and then conclude with an outwardly rational but totally outrageous explanation or resolution. Sugar worked with the twists and turns of such humor, juxtaposing irrational situations arising from social reality with the foolish answers given by the system. His most famous use of the idiom occurred in the “Soup Song” (1931), in which each grim verse is answered with the ironical “Just give them a bowl of soup.”

Unlike the commercialized versions of lumberjack legend (Paul Bunyan, etc.), the stories collected from real woodsmen put little emphasis on the work itself. As Herculean as their work exploits may have been, their work life was assumed; as the core of their identity, it was fundamentally private. Such discreteness also marked their attitudes toward sex, about which, too, no tales were told. “Scrupulous decorum” was the key characteristic in their relationships with women, even prostitutes. Work and relations with females were part of a rigorous code of ethics that one writer compares to “the cult of the medieval knight in providing standards of valor, honor, justice, and chivalry.” But unlike the knight, the lumberjack worked prodigiously, relentlessly, and with profound respect for the object of his labor and a curious selflessness about his own well-being. The ultimate disgrace was to be fired because it was assumed that his skills had failed him. “The stigma would follow him to hell. Other jacks remembered the man who had once been fired, talked about him slurringly, and avoided his company.”

It is fascinating to consider such characteristics and values in relation to Sugar’s mature personality. His enormous capacity for plain hard work and his reputation as a perfectionist in the preparation of law cases were legendary. He also expected the same from his staff. He had no use for slackers. Pride in work well done was matched by a reticence to boast about it. Moreover, friends later remarked about his “courteous” bearing, which gave a well-mannered, polite, and pleasantly diffident character to his relationships with all, but particularly with women. This was part of his charm, of course, but was sometimes seen as a distant, even ascetic, manner. The personality of Paul Wooster in Clancy Sigal’s Going Away is a caricature of Sugar as the austere, single-minded, icy leader of the anti-Reuther caucus in the struggle for the union in 1947. Such traits are easy to magnify for dramatic purposes, and it is useful to remind ourselves of their probable source: the north-woods individualism, chivalry, and reserve of the lumberjacks and not, as Sigal was implying, a steely and highly disciplined “Party” mentality.

Sugar learned from the lumberjacks his first lesson in the power of labor united. The nature of their work required intense cooperation, and living in the camps under such extreme conditions enhanced group solidarity. They could idolize their camp boss, whose strength and skill legitimized authority, but they also knew when they were being exploited. As one Upper Peninsula ditty put it:
Oley Olsen is a jobber,
Who will go to hell some day,
For working men long hours,
and cutting down their pay!

Lumberjacks normally went on strike not for union recognition or the right to bargain collectively on a permanent basis but because they were angry. Resistance arose when they were “fed up,” being worked too hard, or paid too little at a particular moment; they then determined to “change things.” The first Michigan strike—in Muskegon in 1881—arose out of such circumstances. The strikers won their ten-hour day and that was the end of their “union.” Collective bargaining contracts were not the issue; power, some money, and control over one’s own life were.

Brimley had a strike and young Sugar witnessed it. It was called by the hold men at the sawmill.

They had been receiving thirty-five cents an hour and they asked for forty. They had no union. The increase was refused and one day, quite suddenly, they all quit work. I soon learned that a strike by these men meant virtually a strike by the town of Brimley. A couple of days went by, and nothing happened. It was then that I learned what a “scab” was. Listening to the talk in our store and about town, I heard that a number of scabs had been hired. They were recruited from Sault Ste. Marie. The first talk I heard about the scabs was merely that they could never do the work. No experience. And that made the work too dangerous. A day or two later the talk had changed.

To reach the mill you had to walk about a half mile on the trestle. Now there was nothing to prevent anyone from walking on the trestle. And early one morning, when the strike was but a few days old, some scabs who were walking out on the trestle to go to work ran into a number of strikers who happened to be there just when they came along, and who were apparently unfriendly. There was some jostling. The scabs ran back towards land. They traveled as fast as they could, but were impeded by the crossbeams of the trestle which [had] considerable space between them. One of the scabs fell into the deep water and had to be pulled out by some strikers.

The next day none of the scabs showed up for work. The following day the strikers went back to work at forty cents an hour. All Brimley was pleased.

Sugar’s early learning about labor, social relations, and class conflict was rooted in experience. His parents knew nothing of socialism. Kalman Sugar finally joined the Socialist party, but he did so in 1918 under the influence of his son, not vice versa. In the 1890s he was a staunch supporter of William Jennings Bryan. Nevertheless, from life in a harsh environment where hard work was only a fragile barrier against poverty, from the association with an entire community of working-class people and poor farmers, in suffering himself from an education
that taught him to read and little more, and in absorbing the timber tradition of collective, proud, and awe-inspiring labor, Sugar certainly learned important lessons for socialism.

He learned a great deal more—about fighting and drinking, about guns and hunting, about the joys of singing, dancing, and reading. He also learned about himself, his family, and their place in the community and in the United States.

The lumberjacks’ return from the woods was an exhilarating and fearful time. The tales told about exploits with bottle and fist were fine for the public and for the receptive imaginations of boys like Maurice, but for the wives and children of hell-raising jacks, perhaps the stories came too close to reality. The yarn about Joe Donor of Eckerman, who drank himself into oblivion, crawled home, passed out under the dripping eave, and awoke in the morning encased in a frozen shroud was amusing enough but also a frightening reminder that the most frequent victims of accidental death in that part of the world were frozen drunks. The legend of P. K. Small, who would bite the head off of anything from a snake to a pet owl for a drink, got lots of laughs; but he stirred thoughts of the pitiful plight of the old alcoholics who hung around in every town.

The Sugars had their own experiences with drunken lumberjacks. One remained vividly ingrained in Maurice’s memory and is worth recounting, for it captures an aspect of Brimley life and perhaps contributes to the explanation of why he remained a light drinker all his life. Bill, a father of three, had just returned from the woods and, recognizing the temptations in store for himself for the next few days, asked Kalman to keep a portion of his pay packet for him in his safe. Under no circumstances was he to let Bill have the money. A day passed. Late in the evening came a thunderous pounding at the door; it was Bill, dead drunk and demanding his money. He caracled through the store, swearing and screaming. Finally he unleashed a stream of anti-Semitic epithets that terrified Maurice, who watched the whole affair from behind the counter. But his father prevailed. Limp and pale with frustration, the sodden lumberjack left the store. The following day a sober and chastened Bill claimed his money and thanked “K” from the bottom of his heart.

This incident underlines the harsher side of the often glorified milieu of the whiskey-soaked lumberjack. There is no romance here. Nor, in fact, was there a great deal in the other enterprise that preoccupied the story-tellers—fighting. Unreal as might seem the tales of T. C. Cunnion, the man-eater from Petersborough, who reportedly warmed up for a fight by eating babies for lunch, or of the grizzly lynching and mutilation of the McDonald boys by the denizens of Menominee’s Frenchtown, they came perilously close to the truth. Sugar was horrified by the vicious fights he observed as a child. One was a family-grudge match in which sons, seconded by their fathers, tore at each other until one finally got the other down and smashed his defenseless opponent in the face again and again before he “managed to grunt: ‘Nuff! The victor rose slowly,
looking at his left hand. His thumb was hanging by a shred of skin.” This rough-
and-tumble world, where legend and reality melted into one another, became a
permanent fixture in Sugar’s mind.  

So too was the immigrant world he lived in. Brimley was a meeting ground
for people from remarkably diverse origins. Three-quarters of the town’s 179
household heads were born outside the United States, although about half of
these came from English-speaking Canada. Among the minority of “Americans,”
half were born in Michigan and a third in the lumbering Northeast. Most were
of Yankee extraction, although three were second-generation Irish, and three
German. A majority of them had probably worked in the industry in the lower
peninsula (“valley boys”) and had now finally settled down. They largely married
younger women of Canadian background (both English and French) who came
from the more populous Soo area. For their part, the English-speaking Cana-
dians had followed the pine in a similar fashion across their country. A quarter of
these “English” Canadians had Scottish- or Irish-born parents (with the nod to
the latter) and many others possessed Scottish and Irish surnames. Many Brim-
leyites thus spoke English with a brogue. A Congregationalist and a Catholic
church were quickly established to serve their (and others’) religious needs.

The largest single ethnic group in Brimley, however, was French Canadian,
which accounted for about a quarter of the total population. A smattering of
other immigrants (Scandinavians, Finns, and Germans) also found a home in
Brimley, but the Canadiens stood out statistically and in Sugar’s memory. His
best boyhood friend was Tom Belanger, whose large family lived close by. Tom’s
father was a naturalized citizen who had come to Michigan as a boy. He worked
along with three of his sons in the sawmill and lumberjacked in the winter. The
Belangers were typical of the French population of Brimley in many respects and
lived close to their compatriots. Only in the length of their U.S. residence were
they somewhat exceptional. Like most of the other “Frenchies,” the Belangers
did not own their own home. The father was poorly educated and Minnie was
just seventeen (only slightly below the French average) when she married him.
Most of the French had large numbers of children and experienced tragic rates of
infant mortality. In the case of Minnie Belanger, only seven of her eleven chil-
dren had survived as of 1900.  

Members of the other significant national group in the area were all born
there. While only a few Chippewa resided in Brimley itself, some two hundred
lived in Bay Mills. As Sugar remarked, “Indians were a common sight to us—
they evoked no more interest than anyone else.” Although this was the era
nationally of the final onslaught against Indian power and self-respect, the Chip-
pewa of this area still retained much autonomy, continuing to hunt and fish at
will (despite restrictions) and to move as they pleased in the Whitefish Bay
hinterland. Most also retained their Ojibwa names. In a few short years the
“Indian Mission” would change all that, bringing them something called civili-
zation.
Maurice’s little universe, while socially homogeneous, was thus culturally complex. The store rang with a half dozen different accents every day, and at dusk men would sit around and start telling their tall tales. Sugar would later describe the scene in a short story: “Outside the snow whirled . . . the night was so dark that, as the good-natured village storekeeper said: ‘You couldn’t see your hand behind your pack.’ Around the little stove sat a group of unique characters. . . .” And the yarns unfolded—“Ze Skunk,” or how Eve was a Frenchwoman; Finnish tales of Jussi the Workman or the sharp ironies of Lapatossu jokes; Eric Ericson taking resources for racehorses on his tax return; or John Lufkins, the Chippewa Brimleyite who played halfback for the 1898 Carlisle football team, telling about the gift-bearing white missionary, who, when asked if he would go look after a sick woman, answered “yes, but will the presents be safe in the teepee?” “Oh sure,” was the response, “there’s not a white man around for forty miles!”

While we do not know precisely who all the regulars at the Sugar store were, it appears that Kalman served the less-favored elements of the community. In his memoirs Maurice speaks of French Canadians, Swedes, Finns, Irish, and Indians and says nothing of Scottish, English or Scotch-Irish, save a mention of Orangeman’s day and anti-Catholic rhymes. It makes sense that a Jewish peddler would build a clientele among the more “foreign” and poorer elements of the growing community. This was undoubtedly a source of Sugar’s later concern for the plight of the foreign born and of racial and religious minorities.

The Sugars themselves were foreign born, religiously distinct, and, in the terms of reigning late-nineteenth century “scientific” theory, of a separate “race” as well. The Sugar family was conscious of its differentness. There were no other Jews for miles around. But their situation was not unique. The American diaspora carried many Jews to the farthest reaches of the land and left them dotted, often in isolation from one another, across the countryside as tailors and other craftsmen or as small-scale merchants. While they may have maintained contact with other Jews, their religious experience was largely familial and day-to-day friendships were inevitably with Gentiles.

It is thus easy to see why the Sugars were strongly assimilationist in their view of their place in the United States. Both Kalman and Mary sought and gained citizenship as quickly as possible. While Mary and Kalman spoke Yiddish early on, they soon abandoned the use of their native tongue even in speaking to each other, and the children, from eldest to youngest, knew less and less of the language. As time passed, the family discarded most religious practices as well. “We were taught no religious precepts,” wrote Sugar, “notwithstanding that my father presumed to be a student of the Bible, and in the early years performed the traditional rituals of the Jewish Holidays.” Sugar remembered them only “as a strange and puzzling show.” Mary Sugar did keep a kosher kitchen in those days, however; her husband rationalized it on the grounds of good health. “My observance of pig sties around town,” Maurice remembered, “made it easy for
me to accept, but I did wonder why it was that Jews were destined to be the only healthy people.”

While Sugar would retain a Jewish identity, growing up in a largely non-Jewish environment created in him a strong melting-pot outlook. But his family associated mainly with fellow immigrants of non-English backgrounds and hence did not seek assimilation in an “Anglo-conformity” manner, to borrow a phrase from sociologist Milton Gordon. On the other hand, it was not possible for them, like the Irish or the French, to participate in a subsociety of their own ethnic group. They therefore put a premium on interethnic ties through which they built their identities as Americans. If many ethnics did not melt in accordance with the myth, the Sugars, in effect, had to do so in order to work and live where they did.8

Nevertheless, they and young Maurice were reminded in unpleasant ways that they were different. Racist attitudes toward Jews found their way to Brimley, and dealing with them could be a trial. Maurice, in thinking back on those days, recalled the banter of his playmates:

I used to hear boys say: “I had a piece of pork and I put it on a fork and I gave it to a curly-headed Jew, Jew, Jew.” To them this was highly appropriate in my case, as I was curly headed. Sometimes I heard: “Holy Moses, jumpin’ joses, all the sheenies have big noses,” and this in spite of the fact that none of the four kids in our family had a nose that could be considered exceptional in any way.

It would not be true to say that I did not resent these thrusts by my companions. I did. But to me, as it was to them I am sure, it was intended as good-natured ribbing. As I see it now, it must have had its origin in a longstanding prejudice, not in the boys, but in the totality of the environment. I believe that it had the same significance, coming from Tom, as my shots at the French which was in his heritage, such as “Pea soup and Johnny cake make a Frenchman’s belly ache.” There was no ill will in what to him was fun, and for his fun he was drawing upon the only sources which were open to him in the given setting. In truth he had an excellent sense of humor which was a delight to me and which reduced to the trivial any feelings that his jibes generated in me. I was his favorite pal and I knew it.

The reader can sense in this an attitude that might be described as defensive indifference. In reality, the boy (and the man remembering) had little choice about the matter. What is described here is obviously part of “melting”: you had to “take it” from time to time if you were to get along. Sugar would encounter anti-Semitism in more virulent forms in his later life and would vigorously combat it. But his assimilationist mentality provided a degree of latitude, an understanding of the prejudices of others less likely to be found in more easily bruised persons from tightly sealed ethnic environments. For them, the first encounters with racism could be truly traumatic, cause them to retreat back into an ethnic shell, and even form deep reactive hatreds toward other groups. Moreover, Sugar’s early experience of interethnic contact no doubt contributed to the
ease with which he later related to workers from widely varied backgrounds and to his ability to act as an important liaison between groups. The mature Sugar was viewed as rather specially "American" in that while it was generally understood that he was a Jew and that he welcomed close relations with other Jews, he seemed to blend various traditions, both immigrant and indigenous. The Brimley melting pot, with its monoindustrial working class, whose craft was regarded as somehow specially "American," too, was fundamental in the formation of this man.

The Brimley years also saw the formation of three permanent passions that are important in understanding Sugar: hunting, song, and reading. While a love for hunting is hardly unusual for a north-woodsman, it was rather remote from the normal experience of most Socialist intellectuals and more than a few of them opposed it on principle. On the other hand, plenty of Detroit workers, Socialist or otherwise, whether Finns or Anglos from the Michigan north, Poles or Italians from the coalfields of Pennsylvania, or Scotch-Irish from Appalachia, had also been weaned on rifles. Although some of the middle-class leftists who went to the first "Buck Dinner" that Sugar organized in 1929 were surprised that the name derived not from the funds that were to be raised for various causes but from the food they were to eat, many were intrigued by a Marxist who was also a deerslayer. The seriousness with which Sugar took hunting can be measured by the following story. In September 1939, at the height of the legal battle with Homer Martin's renegade UAW-AFL, Sugar wrote CIO general counsel, Lee Pressman, that in setting the final trial date, they would have to wait until after the end of November. Why? Hunting season, of course. "It is part of my religion," he said, "to go deer hunting every fall."

As a boy, Maurice learned to shoot without the blessings of his parents. He bribed friends who had twenty-twos with "a handful of caramels or chocolates or lozenges" and went off a-shooting at virtually any target, animate or inanimate. His first deer hunt took place in secret with kindly Gus Bertram leading him back to town. More public was a shooting contest the boy entered for a dime. Lo and behold, with the contest apparently over, he had won a Thanksgiving turkey! But since there was still one shot left in his group of ten, an old man, who had not been there to preregister for the contest, asked if the rules might be bent a bit so that he might enter. The organizers said it was up to Maurice. "I suddenly found myself faced with one of the most critical decisions I was ever to make in all my life." It was victory and ego versus sportsmanship. Sportsmanship won, and so did the old man: "His bullet drove the tack!"

Sugar wrote at length about such experiences in his autobiography. Clearly, they represented something significant for him. A complex combination of manual skill, knowledge, intellect, and a feel for nature constitute the challenge of the deer hunt. It is important to give some stress to Maurice Sugar the hunter and the man in nature because such individualistic impulses are often ignored in the U.S. Left tradition. Scott Nearing, Sugar's long-time friend, who always stayed with him when he came to Detroit, represents that tradition in an even more obvious
way, finally carving out his own world and sense of being from the woods of Maine.9

It is not surprising that a man who is remembered almost as much for the “Soup Song” and “Sit-down” as he is for his role as a labor lawyer and left-wing activist should have embraced music at an early age. But not just any kind of music. Although Sugar’s mother had visions of his becoming the next Paderewski, a classical piece identified only as “Meditation” was the only thing he ever mastered on the piano. Instead, his interest focused on the little dance hall above Scribner’s store, and he would listen to the strains of “Turkey in the Straw,” “The Irish Washerwoman,” “The Arkansas Traveller,” “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” and dozens more as they wafted across the railroad tracks to his open bedroom window; on occasion, he managed to dance, clap, and sing with the music on the spot. The saloons also blared out lively tunes from their gramophones, and Maurice would sit outside and listen for hours on end. “Neither my father nor my mother responded as I did to the music of the woodsman.” But its cadences, the tight rhyming of the lyrics, and the ironical twists of the story lines captured his imagination.

Young Sugar also loved to read. The books were generally of the nickel-novel variety, though occasionally rising to the level of Horatio Alger or even Mark Twain. “My reading was usually done at night, and for the most part surreptitiously, by the light of a kerosene lamp. It went on for hours after I was sent to bed and the lamp had been blown out, only to be relighted by me when the house became quiet. My trouble lay in my inability to put down any story until I had finished it.” The boy was often listless after these late-night sessions and his parents even called in the doctor, who found him out. But Maurice continued to play the same game. Reading was his passion, and that was that.

The Brimley years were thus remarkably rich and varied. The work life in timber country, a working-class environment virtually untouched by bourgeois amenities, a complex mixture of ethnic influences and a family that of necessity related to the less-favored elements, and the emergence of a mentality that owed something, certainly, to the Jewish tradition but a good deal more to its assimilation into a broader current of cultural interpenetration: these features of that experience stand out most clearly as forces in the formation of Maurice Sugar. He was hardly thinking such things, however, during the lengthening days after his school picture was taken. Instead, he thought, with mixed emotions, about the move the family was about to make. Brimley, Tom, logs, fiddlers, and the warm smells of K. Sugar, General Merchandise, were soon to be things of the past.

Detroit

In July 1900, the Sugar family arrived in Detroit on the most practical mode of summer transportation from the far North, a big side-wheeler that
regularly sailed between St. Ignace and the city. Despite Maurice’s thirst for knowledge, he and his brothers and sister were being ill-educated in Brimley and their parents were determined to seek better schooling for them. Detroit had an enviable educational reputation in those days. Kalman Sugar found it possible to relocate the family there while maintaining the store up north. They moved into a brick house near the northern boundary of Detroit, at 212 Harper Avenue, four blocks east of Woodward, the city’s main thoroughfare. It was a new, middle-class neighborhood and put the children within walking distance of prestigious Central High School.

Maurice found the new environment rather foreign. For a boy who saw his first lawn mower from the boat and his first flush toilet in a Detroit hotel (brother Lawrence convinced him that it was a fire alarm), to move into a neighborhood where he played with Edsel Ford was quite a change. The boy from the north proudly announced when he matriculated at Farrand Elementary School that he was to be a fifth-grader. A week later he found himself in the third grade. The decision to come to the city seemed vindicated. It put some strain on normal family life, however, since Maurice’s father had to travel back and forth between Brimley and Detroit.

Detroit in 1900 stood on the brink of major-city status. With a population of 285,704, it ranked thirteenth in the nation. Its industrial character had been established for two decades. Older consumer-goods industries such as textiles and cigar-making had given way to iron and steel, foundry and machine-shop products, locomotives and railway cars, carriages and bicycles. Pharmaceuticals, too, emerged between 1880 and 1900. As with all burgeoning industrial cities, Detroit attracted large numbers of immigrants, now, above all, Eastern Europeans, who had replaced Germans as Detroit’s dominant foreign-born element by 1900. For example, 14 percent of the city’s hundred thousand immigrants were Poles. Such changes combined with the effects of the depression of 1893 to create social and ethnic tensions of unprecedented proportions. Dozens of conflicts occurred during this period, but the Conner’s Creek rising was the worst. Some five hundred Polish workmen used fists, picks, and clubs to reject the shift to piecework on a public-works project. Three people died in the battle. Violence of this sort fueled the anti-Catholic American Protective Association’s racist condemnation of immigration and even stimulated the Michigan Catholic (run by Irish and Germans) to denounce “savage mobs of howling Poles.”

Hazen Pingree, Detroit’s mayor, had been radicalized by the specter of mass poverty and left the fraternal halls ringing with anticapitalist language: “Vast accumulations of wealth are more dangerous to the liberties of our republic than if all the Anarchists, Socialist and Nihilists of Europe were let loose on our shores.” To the dismay of the business community, Pingree initiated social measures and municipal reforms that caused him to be viewed as the champion of the poor. Most important, he had not, like many self-anointed progressive reformers, assumed that “immigrants” equalled “corruption.” Indeed, as historian Melvin Holli has noted, “the municipal government of Pin-
gree’s period was probably one of the most successful institutions [in the nation] for channelizing ethnic hostilities, sounding out urban discontent, and redirecting human energies.” Pingree left a pervasive inheritance and would be regarded by Michigan Socialists as an important precursor.

In 1900, however, the striking fact of Detroit life was its skyrocketing economic growth. The Sugars had moved from boomtown to boomtown. If the automobile did not take hold immediately upon their arrival, by 1908, 72 hundred Detroiters worked in the various branches of the industry. Eight years later, over 100 thousand found employment in auto. Detroit’s population doubled every decade after 1900. It was the progress of “Dynamic Detroit,” not the struggles of its workers and their unions, that impressed the boy on Harper Avenue. But it appears that he also felt alienated from his new environment. The richness of his memories of the North is matched by the barrenness of his pre-high school Detroit recollections. He might have appreciated the nice house and the good school, but the atmosphere of gentility dampened his spirit. The Sugars’ neighbors were businessmen and professionals with English, Scotch-Irish, and a few Irish names. Slavs and Italians on Harper lived well to the east and there was not a Jew in sight.

Detroit had its Jewish neighborhood. Indeed, when debating the location of the new Central High building after its original downtown site burned down in 1893, the school board rejected a location perilously close to it, arguing that the thrust of “better” Detroit was to the north; hence, the semirural site at Warren and Cass. Less than 3 percent of Detroit’s total population in 1900 was Jewish. This still represented an immense increase during the last decade. Detroit’s original Jews were German. They were rapidly outnumbered by immigrants from the vast world of the Pale. In fact, 88 percent of all Russian immigrants in Detroit were Jews. The Detroit Sunday News-Tribune delineated “the ghetto” in a story published in September 1896: “In a rectangle formed by four streets, Monroe, Watson, Brush, and Orleans, the larger portion, by far, of all the Jews in Detroit have made their home. Of this whole district, Hastings Street is the business thoroughfare. Around that street and those that adjoin it pretty much all that is orthodox and distinctive of the Jewish race [sic] in Detroit clusters.” Besides serving as a minor document in the history of racism, this quotation underlines the tendency toward geographical concentration among more recently arrived ethnic groups.10

But the Sugars were not part of this process. In light of their earlier experience of ethnic isolation, their strong assimilationist views, and their rejection of religion, this is not surprising. It does not mean, however, that young Sugar was oblivious to the realities of anti-Semitism, particularly in these worst of times in his parents’ native land. This was the age of Pobedonostsev, of the Black Hundreds, of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, of the pogroms that sent hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews to the United States. Sugar remembered a chilling conversation that he overheard on the streetcar. That very morning, a story had appeared in the papers about a pogrom in Russian Poland in
which hundreds of Jews had been murdered. One of the men said, “I’m just as much against these Jews as anyone, but I don’t go for this killing them. That’s going too far.”

“Yes,” said the other, “they shouldn’t do that.”

“Sure,” said the first. “What they ought to do is put them all together and keep them somewhere by themselves, but this killing them—no, that’s going too far.”

The boy was dumbfounded. “I had liked the looks of these men,” Sugar wrote. “I could tell by their appearance, their quietness, and their friendly attitude towards each other that they were perfectly normal men, ‘good’ men.”

Just as mortifying was Sugar’s personal experience in high school. In his last two years at Central, he became a prominent figure. Good-looking, self-assured, and an outstanding student, he was also captain of the junior varsity football team, partner in the “model” debate duo with his brother Vic and captain of the debate team, the most articulate member of Central’s mock legislature, and coeditor of the school’s famous literary magazine. But he was not to be senior-class president. He undertook an active campaign for the office and engaged the services of Bob Vinton, star basketball player, as manager.

“One day he came to me to report,” Sugar recalled, “showing signs of mingled disappointment and indignation.”

“The dirty crumbs!” he said.


“You know what those guys are doing? They’re going around and telling everybody not to vote for you because you’re a Jew. And a lot of guys are telling me that they would vote for you except for the fact that you are a Jew.”

“They are? And what do you say when they say that?”

“Oh,” he said, “I tell them that I’d rather vote for a good Jew any day than a crummy white man!” Sugar lost the election by a wide margin.¹¹

While much more conscious of racial and ethnic stereotyping than most of his classmates, Sugar himself was not immune to the involuntary use of racist imagery. This can be seen in two or three of his short stories for the Central High School Student. He had never seen a black person before he came to Detroit, but derogatory language about blacks had been part of the vocabulary of Brimley children. In his first published piece of writing, a tall tale called “The Handcuff King” (March 1909), Maurice used racist imagery, apparently unaware that he was saying anything inappropriate. The hero tells a tall tale about going off to “darkest Africa,” being surrounded by a “tribe of savages,” and tricking these “niggers” (and the word is repeated more than once) into chaining themselves to one another in such a way as to bash themselves to death against a tree.

How should such a story be interpreted? In the first place, the violence and sleight of hand in the yarn may well have derived from north-woods tales, quite possibly in this case from one of the many Chippewa stories of Winabijou the Trickster. More important, however, is the evidence of a nonchalant racism in
which Africans were “natives” and no one (except blacks) gave a second thought to minstrel shows. That Sugar reflected such a mentality is hardly surprising given his comfortable, all-white environment. After all, even Upton Sinclair, champion of the despised East European ethnics of the Chicago stockyards, was unable to control his pen as he had his black strikebreakers dance around and menace white women during a climactic moment of The Jungle.

To transport ourselves back to the days when that passage (like the constant barrage of racism in Jack London’s novels) hardly raised an eyebrow among enlightened, often socialist readers, is difficult. It is to Sugar’s credit (and to that of the reformed Socialist party when he joined it in 1913) that such prejudices would be squarely confronted and rejected. At the height of his career, Sugar would be an outspoken antiracist and a renowned civil-rights lawyer—risking his reputation and, indeed, his life in defense of black people. From a Marxist perspective, this was the only choice one could make once it was understood, as Sugar later put it, that racism is “rooted in and grows out of the economic basis of the prevailing social system, branching out in a multitude of directions.” Racial equality thus became a pillar of belief equal to his faith in the destiny of the working class to recast U.S. society.12

In his recollections, Sugar found it difficult to pinpoint high-school experiences that might have developed his orientation toward socialism. But as editor of the Student, he already showed signs of a social consciousness. For example, an editorial on snobbery and wealth attacked the prevailing practice of wearing lavish gowns and formal wear to commencement exercises. A “relic of barbarism,” it put incredible strains on the families of poorer students. “The love of mimicking the rich,” he wrote, “should be suppressed.” Sugar also developed a sure grasp of current events. As captain of the debating team, he prepared materials on women’s suffrage, freedom of speech, and, significantly, “Emma Goldman’s policies.” In general, his opinions in the Student were moderate, but hints of social rebellion may be found. His first editorial promised that “The Student this year will represent [all] the students of this high school; it will positively not be factional.” High schools such as Central were normally dominated by cliques of the children of a city’s “leading citizens.” Sugar denounced this and may have been stung more than once by not really being a member of it. It was, perhaps, more than a little joke that Sugar’s “theme song,” according to class-day organizers, was “Lonesome.”13

It was less in school, however, than at home that young Sugar faced the tensions of U.S. society. All during his high-school career, the family struggled to stay solvent. Detroit may have been booming, but Brimley was not. Its decline began in 1903 when International Paper, having digested thousands of tons of pulpwood, abruptly departed, leaving a few scraps of forest for a less voracious enterprise, Michigan Pulpwood Company, to pick over. Brimley’s population declined sharply, and Bay Mills virtually disappeared. The number of businesses in Brimley went from forty-one in 1903 to twenty-two by 1909. The decline of itinerants, of wage earners, and of the population in general had its effect on
Maurice Sugar

general merchandising. Sugar's father, fearing the worst, left the store in the hands of Lawrence, his oldest son, and invested in a Detroit clothing business in 1905. Depressed conditions in 1906 put the Brimley enterprise on the edge of collapse, and the entire family had to move back north to help save the store. By the fall of 1907, things had stabilized enough for the younger sons to attend high school in Sault Ste. Marie, where Maurice played on the varsity football team. In 1908, Kalman sold the store at a loss. Although the family managed to return to the Harper address, Sugar remembered continued difficulties.

Such problems made it necessary for him to find summer jobs. The one he had in 1910 introduced him to the life and thought of workers. One incident in particular had a profound influence. Sugar worked the grueling twelve-hour night shift at a small machine shop that turned out crankshafts. He was a machinists' helper but was forbidden to do the precision work required of lathe operators. One evening one of them, Frank, was late for work, and Maurice decided to prove his mettle at the lathe, to show the skilled men that he could handle the job, too. Inevitably, he slipped and gouged a costly shaft beyond repair. Sugar assumed that he would be fired as soon as Frank arrived. When he did, the young man bravely went up to him and admitted his guilt. To his amazement, Frank did not go off to tell the foreman. Instead, when the foreman went into his office, he and Fred, another machinist, hauled the shaft out in back and mixed it into a big pile of scrap. "And that was the end," said Sugar, "of my first personal experience in what I later came to know as 'solidarity' among workers. Frank and Fred and I were workers."\(^{14}\)

A Socialist Lawyer

In September 1910 Sugar entered the law department at the University of Michigan. The family's financial situation made the state university the only possibility, and they looked for the cheapest route to a degree. Maurice's main concern, he admitted later, was "to be a college man." Michigan had three sequences in which one could get a degree in three years, dentistry, pharmacy, and law. Teachers at Central advised law because it would be useful no matter what career he might ultimately pursue.

It turned out to be a fortunate decision. Sugar arrived at a time when the law department was becoming a truly professional and "scientific" program. The case method, taught by legal scholars, had become the measure of a law school's quality. Dean Harry B. Hutchins still complained in 1908 about the "large numbers" of the faculty who remained a "serious embarrassment," for "the old method of teaching by lecture is no longer followed in this or any first-class school." Gone were the days when practicing lawyers would come in a couple days a week and lecture on principles of the law. Besides promoting high standards, Michigan's law department embraced the "Wisconsin idea" of encourage-
ing its professors to contribute to public-policy debate. If Harvard, under Roscoe Pound, best represented this Progressive ideal, Michigan was not far behind. Its next dean, Henry Bates, argued that "the long sneered-at scholar and theorizer is coming into his own"; the "cult of incompetence" was giving way to the age of experts, men who are in a "strategic position" to use their talents "for conspicuous service in the cause of social justice." Law at Michigan would thus epitomize the elitist emphasis inherent in the entire Progressive program.

Sugar had little use for such notions then or later. Indeed, despite the growing reputation of the faculty, he was not particularly impressed by his professors. He learned law and did very well in his courses—making the Wool-sack honorary after his freshman year and Law Review in his last—but his memories of professors' influences were vague. Nevertheless, they did inspire an appreciation of precision in the practice of the law and a respect for the inherent logic of "legal science" that were of great importance for his future. "Use a sharp pencil" became Sugar's motto. By this he meant that while for general reading, understanding the "main idea" is enough, in the law it is not. "What you are seeking," he noted later, "is not only the main idea but the ideas that are minor or obscure, or entirely lacking. Indeed, the validity of a legal contention may depend upon a sentence construction in which the main idea applies to the facts of your case, but the law does not."

Sugar relished wrestling with the intricacies of the law. In one of his first cases after graduation, he defended a man accused of extortion because he had threatened to kill and blow up the shop of a competitor in the laundry business who started to locate in the same neighborhood. Sugar's client was clearly guilty under the "main idea" of the statute—the rival was being deprived of income because of the threat of bodily harm and of physical damage to property. But the sharp pencil located two loopholes: (1) the statute only mentioned threat of injury, not killing; and (2) threats to property in the statute included only property owned by the person or close relatives. The state had produced no evidence of ownership at all. The verdict was directed by the judge—not guilty.

There was nothing "tricky" about this. It involved an agile mind and artful interpretation, to be sure, but above all it involved mountains of hard work. "Competency in the practice of a lawyer," Sugar wrote, "requires constant labor, often sheer drudgery, that is rarely known to clients." Detailed knowledge, not high-flown phrases and courtroom melodrama, was the foundation of skill, and skill won cases (or lost them less disastrously). Sugar may have used the courtroom as a forum to educate the public about capitalism's injustices and workers' rights, but he also used it to educate lawyers and judges about the law. Dedication and sincerity were fine, but they meant nothing unless they rested upon solid, well-researched, carefully organized, and convincing fact.

Thus the law student readily absorbed the focus on scholarship and expertise that the revolution in the discipline was engendering. But the other half of the progressive lawyers' credo, an elitist reformism that sought, as historian Jerold Auerbach puts it, "to preserve existing institutions by making them re-
sponsive to contemporary needs," passed him by. Or rather, he passed it by. For Sugar was soon to be captivated by another sort of principle. Sometime in the fall of 1911 he would read and reread these simple lines: "Law, morality, religion are to [the proletarian] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests." He would also read and reread a scathing attack on his intended profession by a more recent rebel: "The lawyer is exclusively occupied with the details of predatory fraud, either in achieving or in checkmating chicane, and success in the profession is therefore accepted as marking a large endowment of that barbarian astuteness which has always commanded men’s respect and fear." The Communist Manifesto and the Theory of the Leisure Class brought to concrete form a concept that Sugar had only vaguely felt before: that however lawyers might try to "influence" policy, their function in history was to serve as instruments of the ruling class. But he did not come to such a perspective easily.15

Socialism had not been a part of Sugar’s world. Gus Bertram of Brimley was the only Socialist he had ever known. In Detroit, he led a relatively insulated middle-class existence. Despite recurrent economic difficulties, his parents identified with the U.S. economic system that had, after all, created opportunities unimaginable in their native land. Despite recent reverses, they were glad to be here and rejected most of the old ways. And if we are to believe him, Sugar’s initial motivation for going to the circle that met at the home of Otto Markwardt, a young English instructor, had nothing to do with socialism. It was, instead, “to meet girls.”

As it turned out, he encountered something that he had never before experienced—a group of people drawn together to discuss pressing political, social, and philosophical questions who also seemed to have fun doing it. And the socialists in the group actually appeared to be “regular people.” Before long, he realized how little he knew about socialism, how much he had swallowed anti-Socialist exaggerations. He continued to question and challenge, but his counterarguments became hollow, because as he read and discussed Socialist ideas, he became convinced that his new friends were right. He also became convinced of another matter: that “a red-headed freshman, a tomboy from Grand Rapids named Jane Mayer” was a very appealing young woman. Her intelligence and wit captivated him. So did her beauty, although at the time—they were reading John Stuart Mill’s The Subjection of Women—it was inadvisable to mention it.

Jane Mayer was a Socialist. Her parents were Socialists. She had come to Ann Arbor at the urging of the Socialist Markwardt, whom she knew from Grand Rapids. It was not love at first sight, however. In fact, Jane’s first contact with the Sugar family was with Vic, who came to Ann Arbor in liberal arts in 1911 and was her classmate. For his part, Maurice had been dating a vibrant, razor-sharp Irishwoman named Mary Donovan, who later worked tirelessly to free Sacco and Vanzetti and married Indiana’s second most famous socialist, Powers Hapgood, the inveterate labor organizer. But as the school year went by,
Jane Mayer emerged as the most important person in Sugar's life. With her he joined the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, one step short of joining the party itself. There they became active in distributing literature, staging lectures on campus, and discussing all manner of issues under the generous tutelage of Markwardt.

Maurice would marry Jane in April 1914, beginning a Socialist partnership that combined unstinting love with deep respect for each other's individuality. No person exerted a greater influence on Sugar's education in socialism than she. Her background complemented his. Born in Grand Rapids in 1893, she was the third child of Johannes (John) Mayer and Mary Bechtold. John and Mary were both from Württemberg. Although they were born in villages “just an eight hour walk from each other,” they did not meet until they had settled in Grand Rapids. John came to the United States in 1884 after completing his apprenticeships and Wanderjahr as a cabinetmaker and the requisite military service of the Second Reich. The liberal traditions of his region and the advanced ideas he encountered in a notoriously left-wing trade had developed his socialist sympathies at an early age. A tightening market for skilled men and Bismarck's authoritarianism motivated him to join his brother Friedrich in the United States. Friedrich was working on a farm near Ann Arbor. John moved on to Grand Rapids, the furniture capital of Michigan, and was able to find work immediately. Socialist artisan that he was, he joined the Knights of Labor, probably in response to the eight-hour-day movement. After 1886, John Mayer remained loyal to the Knights and bitterly denounced AFL “scabs.” But soon, he had nowhere to go but the International Furniture Workers Union of the AFL. Fortunately, other men like him had joined as well, and the furniture workers remained a bastion of the Left within the federation until World War I. Jane Mayer's mother came from small-owning peasant origins. The Bechtolds' large family could not support, let alone find husbands for, all their daughters, so in 1886 Mary and her younger sister joined their older sister in Grand Rapids. All three found work as domestic servants for the city's prosperous German-American middle class. Mary then realized the dream of many a peasant family: she married a resourceful artisan.

The children came rapidly (six girls and two boys in a dozen years) and John earned decent wages for his work with several of Grand Rapids' famous companies. Like most skilled craftsmen, he possessed an unshakeable sense of dignity as a working man. In 1910 efforts to reorganize work structures and degrade skills at his shop were met with a strike, which failed after several weeks. John lost his job and was blacklisted, creating a heavy burden on the large family at the very time that Jane was going off to college.

The Mayers prized learning. Jane's father read widely and dabbled in writing history—not untypical of German artisan-intellectuals. Her mother had three passionate interests: education, gymnastics, and women's suffrage. Her girls and boys were to have the best schooling possible. She spearheaded PTA activities and worked hard on the tax amendment that financed the creation of
Grand Rapids’ first high school. Both she and John were active in the local *Turnershaft*, an institution that combined physical training with German cultural education. Finally, generally sharing her husband’s Socialist outlook, Mary spoke out often against female inequality and worked as an organizer for the women’s-suffrage movement. These were important influences for Jane and her younger sisters, Gertrude and Emma. All three became teachers of physical education, trade-union activists, and feminists.

Jane Mayer thus came from the very heart of late-nineteenth-century American socialist culture. Otto Marckwardt possessed the same pedigree. Son of a cabinetmaker, his career was diverted from the shops by an accident in which he lost three fingers. His parents sent him to the university, and a Master’s degree in literature was the result. He met Jane, who was only six years his junior, at a *Turnershaft* dance in 1911 and encouraged her to apply for a scholarship at Michigan, where he had recently joined the faculty. She received one and embarked on a liberal-arts degree, majoring in German literature. But it was through Marckwardt that the vital aspects of her intellectual life took shape, and this was where her life began to merge with Sugar’s.16

Marckwardt felt that engaging this young man’s full participation in the Socialist cause was as important a task as he faced in the year 1912. That spring he had coaxed a still skeptical Sugar into speaking about the ills faced by U.S. workers at a number of forums, including a campaign meeting for the Socialist mayor of Flint, John Menton, in his unsuccessful bid for reelection against the rising industrialist, Charles Stewart Mott. At the same time, however, renewed financial difficulties in the Sugar family threatened to end Maurice’s college career. This set the stage for a letter from Marckwardt that had a profound influence on him and was instrumental in convincing the family that Victor, not Maurice, should sit out a year of school to help with the family business. Unlike any other student, Marckwardt wrote, Sugar’s slow and thoughtful movement toward a Socialist world view made him special. “In my mind’s eye I could not see the Intercollegiate without you. The things you had to offer were different from those that anyone else in the crowd brought to it . . . They were also . . . more essential to the life and growth of the organization . . . Your personality is needed in the organization, needed much more than anyone else’s. Don’t make any rash plans.”17

This assessment is important because it is the earliest reference to a quality of mind that would make Sugar a remarkably effective intellectual force: he always thought things through. He mulled, ruminated, set problems in different perspectives, questioned, countered, and then suggested possible alternatives, one of which was obviously the best. Sugar established an intellectual trust in the positions that he took. Many a political activist or union organizer would appreciate this quality. So, clearly, would legal clients and juries.

The world of Marckwardt and Mayer, the comfortable world of immigrant-artisan socialism, now welcomed a man who came to it differently, with much greater effort. But it was not simply an intellectual conversion. Increasingly, he
came to understand the contradictions of his own past. A strange system it was that caused drunken lumberjacks to scream anti-Semitic slurs at someone doing them a favor; that stole the pride and self-respect of the Chippewa; that glorified the self-inflicted violence of exploited woodsmen; that allowed huge corporations to devastate the ecology of an area, attract a sizeable population, and then pull out, leaving broken workers and small businessmen in its wake; and that now could push a fifty-year-old couple to the brink of disaster as one “sound investment” after another blew up in their faces. Sugar began to rethink his own life in terms of them and us.

What sort of socialism did he embrace? The year 1912, the moment of Debs’s greatest electoral showing, was a turning point in the history of U.S. socialism. It is impossible today to agree either with liberal historians who see an “eclipse” of socialism due to Wilson’s progressive reforms or with romanticists entranced by the Wobbly inheritance, who view the Socialist party after Big Bill Haywood’s departure in 1913 as little more than a haven for bourgeois reformers. James Weinstein’s fine study of the Socialist party after 1912 shows that the Socialist press and municipal political influence remained strong, that the Left in the party grew, and that it developed important demands in the areas of female and black rights. But what impressed Sugar the most in 1912 was the Socialist critique of capitalist exploitation and of the inequalities inherent in the legal system.

Eugene Debs became Sugar’s idol. No one exposed the system’s grinding impact on workers better than he. And no one spoke out with a greater clarity on the capitalist biases of the law. “The capitalist court,” said Debs, “is an infallible index to the capitalist system. To know the court is to understand the system.” The Socialist party had recently fought some widely publicized battles with the U.S. judiciary. The most spectacular was the defense of Haywood, Charles Moyer, and George Pettibone, accused of conspiring to assassinate the governor of Idaho in 1905. In the course of this bitter struggle, Debs locked horns with Theodore Roosevelt after the president virtually pronounced them guilty from the steps of the White House. Roosevelt also labeled the main Socialist newspaper, the Appeal to Reason, “a vituperative organ of pornography, anarchy, and bloodshed.” Such utterances brought unprecedented publicity to the Socialists. Haywood’s acquittal was one of the major news stories of 1907.

Arising out of the same case, Fred Warren, the “fighting editor” of the Appeal, was indicted for sending “scurrilous, defamatory, and threatening” literature through the mail. What he had done was to attack the Supreme Court for upholding the extradition of the three to Idaho. Warren finally came to trial in 1909 and was convicted, thus creating another public sensation. Debs crisscrossed the country lambasting the decision and the system that produced it. Only in 1911 did President Taft grant the editor executive clemency. Warren promptly returned the pardon because it did not bear a union label!

Such righteous causes could not fail to inspire a Left-leaning law student. But Sugar also began to appreciate how the law served as a critical “secondary
defense.” Those potential rights of working people and their allies that managed to slip through the “line of scrimmage”—the legislative branch—are “nailed” by the secondary—the judiciary. As Sugar put it in a speech, “Laws prohibiting blacklisting, restricting the power of the courts to grant injunctions, regulating the weighing of coal in mines, prohibiting the use of scrip, and many others have been declared unconstitutional.” In short, “contemporary law functions to maintain the present order in two ways: first, by facilitating the exploitation of the worker, and second, by eliminating or minimizing his resistance to that exploitation.”

During his last year at Ann Arbor, Sugar studied the contradictions of the legal system under capitalism. How could the Michigan Supreme Court hold that picketing, even peaceful picketing, is illegal because it is “inherently” violent? How could the courts deny a jury trial to persons charged with contempt, as often occurred in trials of radicals and their lawyers, especially when the “very judge who issued the order that they were charged with violating” would render the verdict? How could it be said that one form of social ownership, such as the postal system, is a “social necessity” while denying the case for another, the railroads, whose record of disdain for the public interest, exploitation of workers, and obscene profits were a matter of record? The young man’s reputation with his professors grew. One of them, Professor Goddard (an expert on common-carrier liability toward passengers), with whom Sugar had raised the last question, put off a discussion of socialism until a day that Sugar was absent. Sugar hoped it was because the professor was afraid of him. He may well have been. Sugar diligently read many Socialist classics and, especially, contemporary works that focused on the evils of U.S. capitalist society. The first book he recalled reading was Edmond Kelly’s *Twentieth Century Socialism* (1910), a primer for non-Socialists by a Columbia professor. Assuming reader hostility, Kelly presented socialism as both a moral imperative and a logical necessity. Yet his analysis was not really posed in a Marxist framework. The stupidity, wastefulness, and injustice of capitalism were given much greater weight than the class conflict it engendered. Indeed, Socialist Rufus Weeks had to remind the reader in a preface that the two central tenets of the doctrine were historical materialism and class struggle.

But Sugar was impressed. Encouraged by Marckwardt, he went on to John Spargo, the most prolific writer in the Hillquit right-center camp of the Socialist party, and to Jack London. From both he learned hundreds of examples of capitalism’s vicious impact on the lives of working people. He was horrified by the system’s toll in human life, especially the incredible death rates in U.S. mines. In a speech delivered in Detroit, Sugar reeled off the grim figures and then turned novelist, taking his listeners into the home of a family getting the news that their man was dead. The effect of the audience’s tearful response on Sugar was profound. He discovered he could move people.

Sugar also read a great deal in the area of science and socialism and was especially intrigued by evolution and its social implications, digesting Darwin’s
1. An American Radical

Descent of Man and Origin of Species, Herbert Spencer’s First Principles, and Thomas Huxley’s main works. In an age when Darwin was perceived by public opinion to be nearly as radical as Marx, and when Marxism strove to be as “scientific” as possible, such preoccupations were not unusual. Certainly he rejected the procapitalist conclusions of people like Huxley but was nonetheless intrigued by wide-ranging studies utilizing anthropology and biology like Paul Lafargue’s Evolution of Property.

The most important influence on Sugar at this time was Joseph Dietzgen, the Rhenish “worker-philosopher,” Marxist member of the First International, and one of the chief figures among German-born Socialists in the United States. He died in Chicago in 1888. Dietzgen’s main effort was to develop an epistemology that would challenge Kant’s dualism: perceptible phenomena in nature versus empirically unknowable noumena (irreducible concepts, such as space and time) that suggested a realm of spiritual being. He did so through the application of Hegelian dialectics to the interplay of thought and the material world and was lauded by Marx and Engels for his “independent discovery of materialistic dialectics.” With the publication of his Positive Outcome of Philosophy (1887), it became progressively recognized, as the great Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek put it, that “Dietzgen [had] raised philosophy to the position of a natural science, the same as Marx did with history.”

This positivist thirst for an exact-science understanding of human society, of the operations of human thought, and of all natural processes as elements of an integrated, monistic view of the universe was one given great stimulus by Engels, particularly through his Dialectics of Nature (1885), and was a key weapon in the struggle against Bernstein’s revisionism. The main idea that Sugar retained from this reading was that Marxism was not just a view of human beings acting in society, but that it held all the secrets of the universe. This is important, because, while Karl Marx himself remained firmly rooted in history and the observation of human behavior, Marxists of Sugar’s generation, influenced by the positivist belief that absolute knowledge was possible, were cast in a mold where “scientific socialism” was assessed by how it measured up with trends in mathematics, natural science, and analytical philosophy.21

Sugar’s socialism was above all nurtured by the meetings and the publications of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS). This assured that his outlook would be moderate. Promoted by the right wing in the party, the Intercollegiate had been approved in 1905. By 1912, with London and Upton Sinclair leading the way, it had established chapters at forty-three schools. It continued to expand, despite opposition from the party’s left-wingers, who thought funds spent on its lackluster journal, the Intercollegiate Socialist, were a waste of money. Its articles dealt mainly with tactics and reported on the activities of the Socialist student movement. The quarterly seemed hesitant to pursue ideological questions in depth for fear of losing converts. Still, books and essays on a wide range of questions were reviewed and recommended. Among the works most strongly promoted were those of the muckrakers, both Socialist
and non-Socialist. Sugar read dozens of them. Sinclair’s *The Jungle* led the way, but Sugar was also impressed by Gustavus Myers’s *History of the Great American Fortunes* (which effectively exposed the myth of the self-made man) and *History of the Supreme Court* (which exposed it as the system’s ultimate protector) and the works of Charles Edward Russell, who converted to socialism because of his own muckraking. Russell’s famous line, “a kind capitalist would soon be an ex-capitalist,” became a Sugar favorite.22

In stumping for socialism, Sugar was happier describing contradictions of capitalism than he was arguing for its replacement by socialism. In a speech given in Detroit in the fall of 1912, a man in the audience rebuked him for his timidity. In recalling the incident, Sugar exhibited his continuing ambivalence on the question. Is it not better for an audience to digest the facts of the past and present, to understand, and then convince themselves that change is necessary? To harangue people before they are convinced is counterproductive. While Sugar would move far to the left of his Socialist principles of 1912, he never forgot the absolute importance of solid, detailed fact as the basis for the development of Socialist belief. Virtually all his writings and speeches throughout his life were descriptive: clear, carefully organized, well-founded analyses of observable conditions. Even in talking about the Soviet Union after his visit there in 1932, he told his audiences what he saw, contrasted it with what they knew about the Depression-wrecked United States, and let them draw their own conclusions. To have gone on about “the realization of the historical destiny of the working class” and the like, Sugar knew, would have put them to sleep. He remained the good lawyer who wins cases with convincing evidence.23

Sugar did not and would not become embroiled in high-level theoretical preoccupations. He had to make certain that the Socialist perspective made sense philosophically—hence the exploration of socialism in relation to science and religion—but failed to pursue the internal theoretical debates that sometimes degenerated into a twentieth-century form of Scholasticism. Sugar read many of the Marxist classics during this period, but he seems to have preferred the more practical Engels and his interpreter, Karl Kautsky, to Marx himself. He recalled reading only Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It is significant that he would not read *Capital* until he was in prison in 1918–19. Nineteen-twelve was the age of Debs and of the wide, all-embracing Socialist party. Debates between reformists and revolutionaries there were, tumultuous fights over what Marx really meant occurred, but Debs’s pragmatism ruled the day. A focus on practical solutions to practical problems would remain at the heart of U.S. socialism. Armed with such pragmatism, Sugar appeared ready to face the real world. But in facing the real world of work, bosses, strikes, police, injunctions, party factionalism, war, resistance, prison, and the Russian Revolution, he found that theory became increasingly necessary.