



Albert Camus

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Albert Camus

A Concise Biography



Maman

Born on November 7, 1913 in the city of Algiers, Algeria, Albert Camus was raised in a poor working family dominated by a stern grandmother. He never knew his father who died on the battlefield in 1914, at the beginning of WWI. His cherished mother was half deaf and illiterate. Throughout his life he would maintain an exceptionally close contact with her that went beyond the usual filial connection. He and his brother Lucien lived in an extended family, which an uncle had also joined, in a modest apartment located in one of Algiers' working districts. Thanks to the close attention paid by his grammar and high school teachers and against all odds, he was able to study and obtain, in 1935, a graduate degree in philosophy at the University of Algiers with an ambitious thesis entitled *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*. His hypersensitive cultural and political antennas led him to join the Communist party, which promptly threw him out in 1937 after he had uttered growing reservations concerning some of the party's ideological framework and his criticism of its local and international implementations.



Lucien Camus, father



Louis Germain, grammar
school teacher



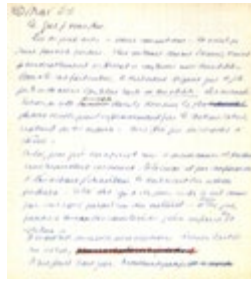
Jean Grenier, master teacher



Camus as goal keeper



Cahier I, Title page



Cahier I, manuscript



Cahier VII, typescript

In the fall of 1935, he created and directed a student theater group named *Théâtre du Travail* (Labor Theater). In October of 1937, after the break with the Communist Party, the name was changed to *Théâtre de l'Équipe* (Team Theater). The intent of the youthful group and its program was to bring world literature plays at affordable prices to Algiers' underprivileged people. A propagandistic play entitled *Révolte dans les Asturies*, fittingly the result of a collaborative creation, could never be performed because the authorities made sure that the group would not find a stage in the city. This politically inspired collective play was yet another confirmation of Camus's lifelong priority that he gave to teamwork. Above all, the artistically, organizationally and financially demanding activities of the two theater groups afforded the future dramatist, who was their initiator, director and occasional actor, an exceptionally well-rounded apprenticeship. Since his early school days, Camus loved sports, especially soccer, a game from which he would derive several key elements informing his ethical values.



Théâtre de l'Équipe, pamphlet



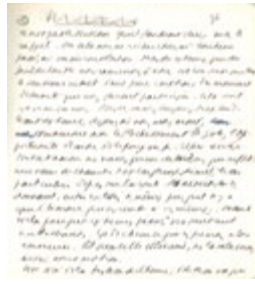
Camus kicking the sky

At the age of 17, he contracted tuberculosis, an illness that would weaken him throughout his life. To survive financially, he had to work in a number of odd jobs, including early stints as an aspiring journalist in the local newspaper, *Alger républicain*. He quickly moved from book reviewer, court and investigative reporter to editor-in-chief. In 1937 and 1939 respectively, he published, in Algiers, two promising lyrical essays, *L'Envers et l'endroit* (*Between and Between*) and *Noces* (*Nuptials*). His progressive political views, deemed anti-colonialistic, contributed to the reasons why the paper, at the outbreak of WWII, became the victim of censure by the conservative local government and why, in March of 1940, he emigrated to Paris. In December of the same year he married Francine Faure. Paris was the cultural and intellectual center for a young aspiring writer. However, Camus would never forget his North African origins and always felt an outsider in the French metropolis. But to the place of future successes, which was also to be the place of never ending exile, he took along drafts of his first major publications which he submitted to France's

preeminent publishing house Gallimard: *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*) and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). Both the seminal novel and philosophical essay came out during the German Occupation in 1942, a time of severe paper rationing. His precarious health situation prevented him from teaching in a public school. For the same reason, earlier in Algiers, he had not been allowed to present himself for the *agrégation*, a competitive national exam guaranteeing successful candidates a position as secondary school teachers. Yet, at the time, aside from journalism, teaching seemed the only remunerative profession accessible to the young philosophy graduate. But his instincts told him that he never really wanted to be part of the French school system. Thus, while still living in Algeria, he refused to begin working as a teacher in a post that he had been offered and had accepted initially. Several times he used his innate talent as a pedagogue by giving private lessons when he was in need of funds to survive.



Camus in his 20s

*L'Envers et l'endroit*, ms.*L'Étranger*, typescript p. 1Camus with the *Combat* team

The same serious health impediments also prevented him from joining the French army at the outbreak of World War II. He found an alternative method to engage militarily. The creation of a clandestine newspaper named *Combat* (*Struggle*), composed of stenciled sheets distributed by hand, was Camus's way to participate in the French Resistance. After the Liberation of Paris in August 1944, the clandestine paper became, under the same name *Combat* and with Camus as its editor-in-chief, one of the most widely read dailies. His brilliant inspiring editorials, whose gist was to inject ethics into the politics of the emerging fourth Republic, remain to this day widely used sources for political and journalistic quotes. In 1944, he also observed the war trial of Marshal Pétain, the hero of the first World War and collaborating president of the Vichy republic. In the same year, he also made himself a name as a playwright with the publication of *Caligula* and *Le Malentendu* (*The Misunderstanding*). While continuing his work as a novelist and essayist, he nevertheless proclaimed the theater as his preferred place and activity. 1945 was the year of birth of the twins, Jean and Catherine. Although eventually *L'Étranger* would become his leading longseller, his second novel, *La Peste* (*The Plague*), published in 1947, turned out to be his first international bestseller. At that point Camus had established himself as one of the most promising French writers and a competitive member of the Parisian left bank intelligentsia that included, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron, and François Mauriac. However, he never felt comfortable in the grey city in which he sorely



Camus behind the curtain

missed the North African sunshine and where he was often perceived as an outsider, if not as an intruder. This discomfort was reinforced in the fifties and beyond, especially after his second philosophical essay, *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*), published in 1951 at the height of the cold war, was roundly rejected by the left, most mordantly by Sartre. In the eyes of most members of the French left, at a time when the Communist Party was the dominating political organization in France, Camus had committed a deadly sin in his essay by juxtaposing and rejecting as dehumanizing two equally absolutist political systems: communism and fascism. In 1956, Camus's self-mocking third novel, *La Chute*, created wide misunderstanding among his fans but grudging appreciation by Sartre. Because of the biblical connotations of the title, some readers opined that Camus was on the verge of a religious conversion. Even before the 1957 Literature Nobel Prize, the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962) had thrown him into a deep personal crisis that eventually led him to keep silent on this thorny and very personal issue. He tried unsuccessfully to offer in speeches and articles a compromise solution that outlined a federate form of government for Algeria. Camus would never live to see the unavoidable outcome of the struggle when, in 1962, Algeria became an independent nation.



Camus, Malraux at *Combat*,
1944



Camus with René Char, 1946



FBI report on Camus's 1946
visit to the U.S.A.



Camus at Pétain trial



Camus family



Jean Grenier the friend



Camus, Writer in revolt

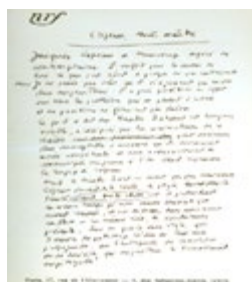


Camus, Garry Davis, Salle
Pleyel, 1948

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Homme révolté, Harvard ms.,



Manuscript Copeau



Introduction



Nobel Prize, 1957

Manuscript page of *Le Premier Homme*

In the late fifties, towards the unexpectedly early end of his life, he was virtually certain to obtain, with the support of André Malraux, France's then Minister of Culture, the direction of a noted Parisian theater. He was also working on his ambitious next novel, *Le Premier Homme* (*The First Man*). While one of its underlying themes is the search of the unknown father, not surprisingly, this retrospective work was dedicated to his mother. Intended to be an ambitious project of Tolstoyan dimensions, it combines in broad strokes autobiographical and multi-generational features. Once the handwritten version of his fragmentary pages had been deciphered by his daughter Catherine, they were published posthumously in 1994 and became, to the surprise of many, an instant world-wide bestseller translated into many languages. On January 4, 1960, Albert Camus was a passenger in the front seat of a sports car driven by his

friend Michel Gallimard. They were on their way back to Paris. He carried in his briefcase the loose sheets of the fragmentary version of *Le Premier Homme*. When the speeding car hit a tree, both the driver and the passenger next to him died instantly. Camus was 47 years old. His unexpected brutal death sent shock waves through the world which resonated for several days in the extensive reports of the world press and other media.



Camus, Greece, 1958



Camus with Michel
Gallimard



Villeblevin, January 4, 1960

To date, the two most informative biographies still are:

- Herbert A. Lottman, *Albert Camus. A Biography*. Garden City, N.Y, Doubleday, 1979.
- Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*. New York, Knopf, 1997.

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