

So 401.2 Piercing the Reich:  
Germany...

# "Presently in Gestapo Hands. Don't Worry."

## The Spies of Yesteryear

By Joseph E. Persico

They are scattered around town today—a former Supreme Court justice, a Voice of America retiree, a labor lawyer—partners long ago in an adventure never fully revealed until now. They—along with other Washingtonians—helped carry off one of the most stunning intelligence triumphs of World War II, the penetration of Nazi Germany by American secret agents at the time it was needed most.

By the fall of 1944, the war appeared over. France had been liberated. Allied armies had breached the German border. The outcome was in no doubt. Surely the Germans were too intelligent to bring down on their own heads the destruction they had inflicted on the rest of Europe.

But Adolf Hitler was all too willing. Along the entire western front that fall and winter, Allied armies felt the unspent sting of the *Wehrmacht*. US commanders now demanded from inside Germany the same kind of intelligence that had paved the way for the conquest of occupied Europe. The Office of Strategic Services was ordered to penetrate the Third Reich.

Until then, the only lands infiltrated by American secret agents were subjugated but friendly ones, where they were welcomed by resistance fighters. Spies penetrating Germany would have to parachute into a hostile world. No safe houses, no friends. No established communications. Gestapo everywhere.

This penetration of the Reich was first revealed, sketchily but tantalizingly, in a document declassified by the CIA early in 1976. I set out to get the full story by



Fred Mayer, now a retired Voice of America engineer, posed as a Nazi officer.

locating and interviewing the actual participants, here and in Europe. For many of my key witnesses, I never had to travel outside the Capital Beltway.

Gerhard P. Van Arkel is a lean, goateed Georgetown resident in his early seventies, a man who speaks with quiet authority while his eyes suggest some secret inner amusement. Van Arkel and his wife, Ruth, parallel another OSS couple, Paul and Julia Child, the French chef, down to Ruth Van Arkel's herb-growing and gourmet cuisine.

Van Arkel was a lawyer with the National Labor Relations Board when Pearl Harbor jolted America into war. Another named Arthur Goldberg, who was then

counsel to the CIO, had convinced General William Donovan of the OSS that among European trade unionists there was a rich vein of espionage agents waiting to be tapped. Wild Bill asked Goldberg to head OSS labor intelligence, and Gary Van Arkel was among the labor experts raided from the NLRB. Van Arkel wound up in Bern, Switzerland, working for Allen Dulles. His mission: to infiltrate American spies into Germany.

During our interview Van Arkel recalled one of the more curious messages of his—or anyone's—espionage career: "Presently in Gestapo hands. Don't worry." The incorrigible optimist was Fred Mayer, now a recently retired Voice of America engineer who lives in Avon Bend, West Virginia, an hour's drive from Washington. Van Arkel had first met Mayer in Bari, Italy, months before, while the latter was preparing for his mission behind enemy lines. He and two other agents were to infiltrate the Redoubt, a near impenetrable Alpine fortress where, it was rumored, the Nazis intended to make a last stand.

The Mayer family had been refugees from Nazism, living in New York at the time young Fred enlisted in the US Army. He caught the attention of OSS because of his knowledge of languages, his full quota of chutzpah, and his hunger for action that bordered on the rash. Mayer was ordered to OSS headquarters in Bari. Almost immediately, he offered to lead a team that would parachute into, and liberate, a concentration camp. The officer who heard this proposal said, "Why don't you just jump out of the window now? It would be cheaper and more practical."

The mission that Mayer finally did was audacious. He and the two other agents parachuted—

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during the dead of winter—onto a 10,000-foot glacier in the Austrian Alps and made their way to a hideout near Innsbruck. Mayer was soon radioing back intelligence on German military traffic entering the Brenner Pass, information that sent US 15th Air Force bombers roaring in for impressive kills.

Fred Mayer became more daring. He acquired the uniform of a mountain infantry lieutenant and moved into the *Wehrmacht* officers' club in Innsbruck. There, a drunken army engineer revealed to him the construction details and location of the Führer's bunker in Berlin, which Mayer's radioman immediately transmitted back to OSS in Bari.

Mayer's luck ran out when a black-marketeer betrayed him to the Gestapo. He was hung upside down for six hours, and bull-whipped. He had water poured into his nose and ears until he fainted. But he refused to talk and even suggested to his captors that they consider surrendering Innsbruck, then in the path of the advancing US 103rd Division. It was at this point that Mayer convinced the Germans to send a message to Van Arkel in Bern, to alert OSS of his fate. Van Arkel seized the German courier and threatened that if any further harm came to Fred Mayer, the man would pay personally.

Gary Van Arkel also recalled for me the day an anti-Nazi journalist casually handed him a Zurich address, saying, "This might be worth a visit." Van Arkel gambled on the 75-mile journey and found himself climbing the steps to the top floor of a drab tenement. There, he met an émigré Austrian Socialist who told Van Arkel something that made the American's pulse race: The man had a colleague who was the track inspector for the rail lines that supplied German forces in Italy.



Gary Van Arkel in 1942, before going to Bern for OSS

Van Arkel worked out a scheme through which the Zurich Socialist journeyed to the Austro-Swiss border town of Buchs and checked into a nearby ski resort. The track inspector took another room there. They dined in their separate rooms, but served by the same waiter—who passed intelligence from one to the other.

Information on troop, ammunition, and arms movements continued to flow, uninterrupted, from the track inspector to the agent, then to Van Arkel, then to American bombers, until the end of the war. For this intelligence trove, Van Arkel was never able to press on the man in the Zurich tenement anything more than a little cash, some coffee, or some American cigarettes.

Gary Van Arkel has little patience with today's romanticized visions of espionage. He found the constant deception, the

anonymity, the living with one eye always looking over his shoulder "nerve-wracking, exhausting, and, ultimately, dehumanizing."

There was another OSS mission that I was curious about, but neither Van Arkel nor Mayer could help me. It was called "Dupont" and was hatched in Bari while both men were there, but neither knew anything about it—good espionage operations are compartmentalized. As it turned out, I stumbled across the full story right here in Washington. Dupont, too, was a parachute mission, in which Jack Taylor, an OSS lieutenant who spoke not a word of German, had dropped, along with three German army deserters, near the intelligence-rich industrial hub of Wiener Neustadt. But Taylor had died several years ago, and because the other three agents were identified only by anglicized code names and were therefore untraceable, I had had to abandon the search for survivors of Dupont.

Then one day I was at the office of the accommodating press officer of the Austrian Embassy, Franz Cyrus, who had agreed to arrange letters of introduction for me to use while researching in his country. Cyrus casually suggested that, before leaving, I ought to look up "Ernst Ebbing."

"Who is Ernst Ebbing?"

"One of those wild fellows who worked for your OSS. He parachuted near Wiener Neustadt with an American and some other agents." Dupont!

"Where can I find Ebbing?" I asked.

Cyrus laughed. The desperation in my voice must have been palpable. "His office is about three minutes from you," he said. I was then working in the Old Executive Office Building, serving as chief

speechwriter for Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.

Ernst Ebbing is not his true name. Like several others I interviewed, he would not talk until assured anonymity. Why the secrecy after all these years? My subjects' reasons were varied—Ebbing, ever reticent, never revealed his.

I met with him a few times, collecting at first only a few bare bones. He had come to America after the war and, because of his sure command of English, had succeeded as a journalist and writer. He became an American citizen, eventually settling in Washington. Finally, one day as we talked at his home on MacArthur Boulevard, the story of Dupont unfolded.

They had parachuted at night in the fall of 1944, bailing out at 400 feet and landing on the rim of the Neusiedlersee, a large lake near Wiener Neustadt. As they gathered up their parachutes, the Dupont team watched in horror as the chute carrying their radio sank into the blackness of the lake.

Their leader, Taylor, was a taut and taciturn man. His frustration mounted as they unearthed invaluable intelligence that they could not communicate—the site of a huge, unscathed munitions complex: the plan for the Southeast Wall, an important German defense line. Tension crackled back and forth among the men as they shifted from one insecure hideout to another, night after night. Then one of the team members looked up an old girl friend. Her father informed the Gestapo. The Dupont mission was undone.

Ernst Ebbing was sentenced to be beheaded as a treasonous deserter, as was his Viennese father, a Luftwaffe captain who had aided Dupont. Lieutenant Taylor also drew a death sentence and was shipped to the Mauthausen extermination camp. There, Taylor was assigned to a bricklaying crew that built crematoria for disposal of gas-chamber victims' bodies. Taylor survived because a friendly trusty burned his execution order. Ebbing beat the headsman by escaping from a prison camp in the chaos of the war's final days.

Today, Ernest Ebbing is a handsome, athletically trim man, quiet in aspect and strong in his opinions. His youthful appearance belies his 54 years. I asked him if he recalled his feelings as he stood poised in the doorway of that aircraft, about to drop as a spy into Nazi Germany. His expression assumed the fatalism he must have felt that long-ago night. "I looked down and thought, this is the God-damned end."

If agents like Ernst Ebbing and Fred Mayer expected to pass inside Germany, they needed papers, a convincing cover. I wanted to know how

the logistics of deceit were performed, and found many of these answers too among Washingtonians.

Peter Karlow today is a consultant to businesses on international affairs. Between his globe-trotting, he lives off River Road in Bethesda. But back when World War II broke out, young Karlow, then fresh out of college, was pulled into the orbit of an obscure new government body, the Office of the Coordinator of Information, which was the seed of the OSS.

One of Karlow's duties was to scan the manifests of neutral ships entering the port of New York, looking for promising intelligence sources among the passengers. Karlow would then contact the best prospects and, in the course of casual conversation, pump them for the locations of key utilities, military installations, and rail and port facilities in the German cities they had inhabited.

But Karlow wanted more. He and his colleagues would literally take the shirts off the refugees' backs—buying them, along with their suits, shoes, hats, coats, luggage, razors, virtually any personal articles they were willing to sell.

They always had faintly plausible explanations for their odd interest. The steel in a razor might reveal something of German metallurgical processes, they said. The quality of a fabric might hold clues to the state of the German economy. A pen? Just an interesting souvenir.

In reality, these items—and others obtained from prisoners of war and inhabitants of conquered territories—went into an OSS clothing depot. And it was from this rummage heap that agents were outfitted for missions into the Reich, right down to German-made shoelaces.

I asked Karlow how these recent arrivals reacted to his questions and acquisitiveness. "After what they had experienced in Europe, most of them were afraid not to cooperate. They still didn't know what to expect of life in America. Besides, most of them had lived extraordinary adventures. They were bursting to talk about it and wanted to help."

Henry Sutton, who for a time was a CIA colleague of Karlow, was one of the most celebrated privates in the OSS. I found Sutton on Idaho Avenue where he lived until his recent death. He was an enormous man and spoke in a piercing Viennese accent—he was born Heinrich Sofner. His apartment groaned under heaps of books on international affairs, leaving only narrow corridors for passage.

During the 1930s, Sutton had been an official of a white-collar workers' union in Austria and a target of Nazi persecution. He was drafted and later recruited into the OSS.

working in what formerly had been a house of fashion on Grosvenor Street in London. There, Henry Sutton quite literally invented people, the personae that US agents bound for Germany were to assume.

One way that Sutton prepared himself was by scouring German newspapers smuggled out through neutral countries. Local papers, particularly, contained seemingly innocent items of enormous value to agents about to infiltrate—notice of a change in the rationing documents required, for example. One paper reported the arrest of a woman for selling black-market cigarettes to a French conscript worker, and from this account Sutton learned the name and location of an actual labor camp, which he was able to weave into the cover story of a spy who was to pose as a conscript worker.

Another Sutton client was an American scheduled to go into the Reich as a Frenchman. The man presented Sutton an unusual challenge. His French was good, but his accent was hardly likely to be encountered anywhere between Normandy and the Pyrenees. Sutton and another colleague studied a map. Their Frenchman, they decided, came from Martinique. What German was likely to know what a Martinique accent sounded like?

Sutton spent hours drilling agents in the details of their new identity. "The first thing I pounded into their heads," he told me, "was 'What is the color of the buses in your hometown? What is the name of the cemetery where your parents are buried?'" He had learned that these were among the first questions the Gestapo put to suspected spies.

Former Justice Goldberg, who today practices law from offices on Seventeenth Street, was virtually the first to persuade General Donovan that the OSS could crack the Nazi heartland. British Intelligence had never been optimistic about the possibilities, and therefore tended to discourage American efforts. But all told, the OSS succeeded in placing more than 200 secret agents into virtually every significant sector of Germany. Did their efforts shorten the war by an hour or a day? We have no way to measure their contribution to the myriad ingredients of victory. But this much is certain: The successful penetration of the Reich represented the peak of OSS proficiency during World War II. America, essentially without an intelligence service when the conflict began, had a spy apparatus to rival any nation's by the time the war ended. Indeed, an impressive number of the OSS Washingtonians who went on to build the CIA cut their intelligence teeth while piercing the Reich.