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How WWII Gave Life To The CIA

Newly declassified papers reveal the U.S. spy agency in its infancy

By David Kahn

ON DEC. 5, 1944, an official of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA, outlined a plan for setting up a spy ring in Nazi Germany.

The official, Thomas B. Wilson, had become interested in using anti-Nazi church groups in the Rhineland as a basis for such a ring. Soon the OSS found a prospective agent.

He was Hans, a private in the U.S. Army. Born in East Prussia 35 years before, and later a student of theology at several prestigious German universities, he had lived in the Rhineland for several years. In 1935 — two years after Adolf Hitler came to power — he left Germany. His background made him an excellent choice to infiltrate Germany and to contact the religious officials in the waning months of the Second World War.

The OSS code named the project the CHURMI mission and set it in motion. From Dec. 28 to Jan. 2, Hans met in Paris with another expatriate, Fritz Lieb, formerly a professor at Bonn, where Hans had studied, and at the time of their meeting a Swiss citizen teaching in Basel. Also present was the OSS' Carl Auerbach. They discussed mainly "safe houses" — places where Hans could be sheltered without fear of betrayal to the Gestapo.

On Jan. 7, Lieb returned to Switzerland to make arrangements for Hans' support after he was parachuted into Germany. Hans began spy training.

By the middle of February, this had been completed. But the OSS had not yet worked out a cover story for him nor provided the fake documents he would need to substantiate this story.

In March, 1945, Cologne, the chief city of the Rhineland, fell to the advancing Allied armies. Operation CHURMI was shelved.

This tale, admittedly rather anticlimactic but in that way true to much of life, is one of several similar ones to be found in a vast hoard of recently declassified OSS documents. They have been transferred by the Central Intelligence Agency to the National Archives, where they are now open to the inspection of scholars. Filling 109 gray archives boxes, they consist of originals, carbon copies and negative photostats of the innumerable reports of departments and subsections, of unit histories typed on large sheets of blue paper in black binders, of photographs, letters, endless memoranda, orders and mimeographed unit-strength reports, pencil sketches of organization charts crumpled into manila envelopes.

They deal with training, supplies, the endless personnel transfers, new quarters, the technicalities of radio transmission and reception, statistics — down to such details as the death in a car accident of a private. They include many names now famous: Lt. William J. Casey, then head of the Secret Intelligence Branch of the European theater, now head of the CIA; Maj. Arthur Goldberg, then head of the Labor Division, later a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; Cmdr. John Ford, then chief of the Field Photographic Branch, later one of the great movie directors; Willi Brandt, then the Swedish contact of an anti-Nazi group, later chancellor of West Germany; Capt. Walt W. Rostow, then a liaison officer to the British Air Ministry, later President Lyndon Johnson's national security adviser. But, amidst the floods of trivia, stand out fascinating nuggets about the techniques, trials and triumphs of American espionage in its embryonic stages.

One of the first problems in spying is to find a spy. No single principle for recruiting agents was found reliable, the report of one unit stated. "In the last analysis the recruiting was done 'by ear.' In other words, [Lt. A. E.] Jolis's conviction that a man would make a good agent was the final deciding issue." The report conceded that the security check in such cases was "not too satisfactory."

Once an agent was recruited, he had to be given a cover story — his false identity. The documents tell that one OSS division began by describing the agent, determining the character of the mission, and getting the agent's ideas about what the cover story should be.

The agent had to be not only fully familiar with his cover story, but fully sold on it as well. This required "salesmanship" on the part of the person briefing the agent, noted a history of the briefing division. "This inevitably involved the ability to dominate the agent. Briefing an agent was not the sort of activity that could be done mechanically. The agent had to be given faith in his story. Confidence in himself was the first condition of success."

For the data that would make its fake documents appear authentic, the briefing division searched in captured documents, newspapers, prisoner-of-war interrogations, telephone books. "An ordinary factory not only gave its address in the telephone directory, but also the names and addresses of its directors. If the agent's cover story included having worked at a particular factory, he had to know the names of some of the officials. The telephone directory told him," said the history.

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