

Behind Enemy Lines

ESPIONAGE

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The Unknown Spies

*The Spy
Who Stole
America's
Atomic
Secrets
And Got
Away
With It*



For decades he fooled the West into thinking that a handful of bungling communist sympathizers had smuggled the most sensitive atomic secrets out of America's most guarded facilities. Only after his death did the Soviets reveal the stunning fact that they had planted a professional spy deep inside the ultra-secret Manhattan Project, the research and development program that produced the first atomic bomb.

In the early 1950s, the controversial FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover began a massive campaign to root out spies who were aiding the Soviet Union in obtaining America's atomic secrets. He pursued a number of suspects, many of whom never had any access to America's secret atomic knowledge. These included the Rosenbergs,

Morton Sobell and others (see *Zman* Adar I 5771/February 2011).

Meanwhile, the greatest spy—the only professional spy the Russians managed to plant inside the Manhattan Project—completely escaped Hoover's attention. In fact, almost no one had ever heard of the man, George Koval, at the time of his death

on January 31, 2006. It seemed that he had taken his secret with him to the grave.

But then, in November 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Koval the Golden Star medal, Russia's highest decoration, posthumously declaring Koval a "hero of the Russian Federation." Putin revealed that Koval had been the agent behind the code name "Delmar" who was recorded in many spy books as one of the greatest Soviet spies ever. His work had greatly hastened the Soviet nuclear program, allowing the nation to stun the world when it detonated its first atomic bomb in 1949.

In fact, Delmar's identity had remained such a secret that Putin, himself a former KGB officer, had not discovered the man's true name until 2006. At that time Putin noticed a portrait of Koval at the opening of a museum of the GRU (Russia's military espionage agency) and asked, "Who is that?"

For years, American historians had concluded that Russia's ability to produce an atomic bomb so early could not have been purely the work of independent nuclear scientists and engineers. It must have been accomplished through espionage, allowing Russia to speed up its research by stealing America's knowledge and experience. But for decades the blame had fallen on such people as the Rosenbergs and Harry Dexter White, a high-ranking official in Roosevelt's Treasury Department who died suddenly of a heart attack shortly after being subpoenaed to testify at a hearing of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1948. The truth, though, was not revealed until Putin made the knowledge public over 50 years later.

In sharp contrast to the Rosenbergs, George Abramovitch Koval was in a position where he had access to some of the most sensitive secrets about the atom bomb. This included the initiator, the section of the bomb that triggers the chain reaction—without which Russia would never have been able to produce its own atom bomb.

Of course, the entire "Manhattan



George Koval.

Project," as the effort to produce the first atomic bombs in the US was known, was a strict military secret. Each of the three sites involved were strictly guarded with the highest security possible. To be able to smuggle secrets out of them took extreme professionalism. A spy who entered there would have had to have a solid plan of action, even more solid training in espionage, the ability to lie without giving himself away and more than a bit of "good luck."

Koval was not a simple American who was sympathetic to the Soviet cause—such a man would not have been able to get the job done. Koval was trained and had experience as a spy for Russian intelligence. To this day it remains unclear how a person like Koval managed to infiltrate the Manhattan Project.

Childhood

George Koval was an American by birth, born in Sioux City, Iowa. In the early 1900s that city was blossoming into a center of business and culture. It attracted immigrants from Europe and Russia, including many Jewish merchants and craftsmen. These Jews were largely successful (at least in the material sense), opening shuls and forming social circles of their own.

Some of these immigrants from Eastern Europe brought with them the liberal political views that were all the rage in their homeland. Among them was Abraham Koval, a carpenter from Telekhany, a town in White Russia (today known by its Russian name, Belarus) near Minsk. He and his wife Ethel arrived in the US in 1910. Their oldest son Isaya was born in 1912. Next came George in 1913 and finally Gabriel in 1919.

The Kovals were very successful and their children excelled in their studies. The parents inculcated their three sons with communist ideology from childhood. George went to study electrical engineering in the University of Iowa at age 15, where he remained for two and a half years.

The outbreak of the Great Depression brought the growth of Sioux City to an abrupt halt. In 1932, suffering from the harsh economic turnaround, Abraham Koval packed up his belongings and moved back with his family to the Soviet Union. The Kovals were convinced that under the communist system they would find a life of joy. After all, the communists had freed Russia from the yolk of the oppressive Czar and promised complete equality to all.

The senior Koval had led an organization in America whose goal was to convince fellow Jews to move to the Soviet Union. (This organization was at odds with the Zionist movement, which was simultaneously seeking to convince Jews to move to Palestine....) With the sudden turn in his fortune, Abraham Koval saw it as the right time to follow his own advice.

The Kovals traveled to Russia under American passports, intending to move back to Minsk. However, upon their arrival the authorities refused to permit this (probably out of fear that this family had come to spy for America). Instead, the Kovals were sent to settle in the city of Birobidzhan in the "Jewish Autonomous Oblast" in Siberia. This was where Stalin had hoped to create a Soviet-communist paradise for Jews that would convince them to resettle there



Putin awarded Koval a Golden Star medal posthumously for his work for the Soviet Union.



The Great Depression sent many Americans like the Kovals seeking a better life elsewhere. Here Americans hang onto a train to Canada in search of jobs.



Port on the Missouri River in Sioux City, Iowa.