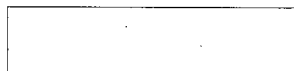




TITLE: The Story of Herma Plummer

AUTHOR:



VOLUME: 35 ISSUE: Spring YEAR: 1991

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

All statements of fact, opinion or analysis expressed in Studies in Intelligence are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or views of the Central Intelligence Agency or any other US Government entity, past or present. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying US Government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.

A passion for truth

The Story of Herma Plummer

[REDACTED]

If a list were to be made of the most prominent women who have served in CIA's Directorate of Operations (DO), many past and present DO officers would put Herma Plummer's name at the top. When she retired as a GS-15 in August 1968, she was awarded the Agency's Intelligence Medal of Merit. This was an appropriate tribute to an outstanding member of a generation of American intelligence professionals to whom much is owed.

Herma Plummer had a certain aura. One of her colleagues in the DO who worked with her in the early 1950s recalls her as an attractive, tall woman, always elegantly dressed. She would have been in her early forties at that time, and she already was an intelligence veteran. Newcomers to the DO regarded her with awe. One recently retired senior officer who knew Herma in [REDACTED] in the early 1960s commented that she "was one of those OSS veterans one was expected to treat with due respect." Another senior officer who worked with her later in her career commented that "she has an attitude of indignation toward incompetence which sometimes suggests a tendency to confuse incompetence with sin." This uncompromising approach to business and her penetrating intelligence made her one of the premier counterespionage analysts of her time. Few of her coworkers would have been aware of the searing experiences which molded her earlier life and which led her eventually to Allen Dulles and the OSS.

Early Life

Herma's father, Louis Pulvermacher, was born in 1876 in Stawiszyn, Poland, a predominantly German area, and he was a Jew. After emigrating to

the US, he began working as a journalist in New York City shortly after the turn of the century. He married Dora Holden, who also was Jewish. She was born in Czernowitz, Austria (Cernati, Romania) in 1880. Herma was born in 1908 in New York. She grew up in Germany and the US. She attended school in both countries, including Hunter College and Berlin University, where she took classes in international relations. She became perfectly bilingual in English and German, and she acquired her well-traveled parents' cosmopolitan outlook.

Sometime during the late 1920s, the marriage of Herma's parents apparently failed, and in 1928 Herma was in Berlin supporting an ailing mother through a series of secretarial and stenographic jobs with German and American firms. Letters of recommendation written by her employers at that time all praised her intelligence and bilingual stenographic skills. In 1930, she was hired by the US Foreign Service as a stenographer¹ at the American Consulate General in Berlin, where she soon would meet George S. Messersmith, a Foreign Service Officer reporting on political events in Germany. This remarkable man would play a significant role in Herma's life over the next 13 years.

Herma Pulvermacher seems to have led a normal life during this period. Sometime between 1928 and 1934, she became engaged to a young German. Berlin of the late 1920s and early 1930s suffered from the grinding depression that existed throughout Germany. But it remained an exciting, decadent city. National Socialism did not flourish in Berlin, and Adolf Hitler did not win a majority of votes there as he did in the rest of Germany.

Berlin was a center of Jewish life in Germany, and it had the largest Jewish population of any German city. Following Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, life became increasingly difficult there for Jews, even for an American Jew. By this time, Herma had been working for Messersmith for three years.

In 1934, Herma was desperate to escape Germany with her dependent mother. Her meager salary of \$1,200 per year did not allow her to save enough to get back to the US. She put her hope in appeals to the Foreign Service for a transfer. Messersmith, meanwhile, had been reassigned to Washington in 1933, and almost immediately thereafter to Vienna. He wrote to Thomas Wilson, Chief of the Personnel Division of the State Department, recalling that Miss Pulvermacher was "extraordinarily capable and one of the best stenographers I have come in contact with . . . (She) was a tower of strength to me. She was engaged to a young lawyer in Berlin when the new regime came in. She was a Jew, and, under the new laws and decrees, if they married the legal profession would be closed to him. He was going through with the marriage, but Miss Pulvermacher broke off the engagement rather than spoil his career. She has . . . suffered tremendously . . . as the result of the discrimination against the Jews . . . and when I left Berlin to go home in November 1933, she asked me to try to get a transfer for her to some other office as she felt she could not continue at Berlin."

Messersmith knew transfers were extraordinarily hard to come by for clerks. In addition, Messersmith's priggish successor in Berlin was loath to lose such an outstanding employee, no matter what the personal cost would be to her. In November 1938, she was still stuck in Berlin, and her situation was becoming increasingly desperate: "The air and atmosphere of Europe is lying so heavily on my heart and soul that it would be a tremendous relief to get out of it all. It is becoming so bad, and daily worse, that I cannot describe it to you. But I am sure you know all about it and you understand the necessity of my leaving here—after six years of National Socialism."²

Herma continued to write to every Foreign Service contact she had pleading for a transfer: "You have

probably heard of the serious turn for the worse that conditions here [in Berlin] have taken. It is even worse than I had expected it ever to become. There is hardly a restaurant one can go to, not a single public bathing pool, and it is taking quite a chance to go to a theatre or moving picture house. I am really quite desperate and can hardly stand the atmosphere any longer."³ Herma wanted to get out of Europe entirely, and she hoped for a transfer to "an Anglo-Saxon country," preferably Australia.

Colleagues and friends, especially the indefatigable Messersmith, who by that time was US Ambassador in Havana, continued to work behind the scenes to pull every string possible to extract Herma and her mother from Berlin. These efforts finally were rewarded in March 1939, when she was transferred to the American Consulate General in Mexico City. She used her Spanish language skills there, handling visa applications and interviewing callers. Sometime during this same period, Herma apparently became engaged to a young man in the US.⁴

Growing personal problems and increasing uncertainty in her life forced Herma to turn again to Messersmith. In May 1940, she was transferred to Havana to work as his confidential secretary.⁵ Unfortunately, their reunion was short-lived. During the summer of 1940, her mother had to be placed in an institution in the US. At the same time, she learned that her fiancée was seriously ill. She resigned her position with the Foreign Service,⁶ and she returned to the US to be nearer her mother and her fiancée. In December 1940, she went to work in New York for the Joint Distribution Committee, a philanthropic organization which distributed aid, primarily to Latin American countries. She was to hold this job until 30 November 1943.

OSS Service

In April 1942, Messersmith wrote a letter of recommendation to Allen Dulles reciting Herma's record. He also noted that "she had her name changed to Plummer legally in the United States. She has such a hatred of things German that she

wanted to get even her name changed." He continued that "when she worked for me, she had my full confidence, which she never once in any way betrayed. As to her attitude towards Germany and towards the United States, and as to her Americanism, there is absolutely no doubt. As a matter of fact, she is almost a fanatic. Her faithfulness knows no limits. During the short time she was in Havana, I had reason to know of her extreme loyalty."

One senior intelligence veteran recalled a rumor that Herma had been Allen Dulles's secretary in [redacted] at some point during the war. The period in question parallels Dulles's establishment of his operation [redacted] following Operation Torch. Herma would certainly have been qualified to serve in such a capacity, but there is no record of her having been there. Her eventual assignment in OSS in Washington, however, was connected with the "Dulles organization" in [redacted]

The record shows that in November 1943 Herma joined OSS. Her background and knowledge of the European environment probably was recognized immediately because, as of 8 December 1943, she had been assigned to X-2 with the title "Intelligence Officer." X-2 had been established as General William Donovan's counterespionage service.

X-2 was headed by Donovan's friend and close associate [redacted] Herma became a division chief "in charge of . . . work . . . covering all aspects of their activity for Germany, Switzerland, and Czechoslovakia."⁷ She supervised 10 research analysts who handled operational reports, as well as directing the training and dispatch of personnel to the field. Her immediate supervisor was Richard Helms.

Herma must have been privy to some of the most sensitive operations of the war, including Dulles's contacts with Admiral Canaris and the frantic efforts towards the end of the war of the Chief of the German General Staff, General Heinz Guderian, and Field Marshal von Rundstedt, supreme

German commander on the Western Front, to reach an accommodation which would permit surrender to the Western Allies while maintaining a front against the Soviets.

In October 1945, Herma was sent to assist Donovan during his sojourn in Nuremberg. He had been there since 17 May 1945 as Special Assistant to the US Chief Prosecutor, Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson. OSS had been designated as the US investigatory unit for the International Military Tribunal, the "Nuremberg Trials." Donovan had no policy powers in this capacity, and he clashed with Jackson over the decision to declare the German general staff and officer corps criminal organizations—something Donovan opposed. Donovan finally resigned from Jackson's staff when President Truman agreed to support the Soviets' demand for indictment of the general staff for war crimes.⁸

As head of the German/Swiss Desk, Herma probably played an important operational role at Nuremberg. Her work would have made her uniquely knowledgeable of the German intelligence services. And almost from the beginning of his stay in Nuremberg, Donovan had been engaged in the dissection of these services. Kaltenbrunner, head of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), had been captured in Austria before Donovan's arrival. He had revealed the existence of a functioning German intelligence network in the Balkans, from which the Soviets had ousted OSS, and he offered to help Donovan maintain it in exchange for amnesty.

The net was run by Wilhelm Hoetl, head of the Vatican/Balkan section of Amt VI, the foreign intelligence section of the SD. Hoetl had been captured by Patton's 3rd Army. Donovan refused the deal, and, shortly thereafter, X-2, using Hoetl, captured the network's *centrale* in Steyr, Austria. The Balkan elements were revealed to the Soviets, who eliminated them.⁹ During this period, General Bradley's Chief of Intelligence, General Sibert, and Allen Dulles also were holding discussions of consummate importance with General Reinhardt Gehlen, chief of German intelligence on the Eastern Front.

In a 3 January 1946 letter from Nuremburg to [redacted] Herma expressed her "very best wishes for a happy new year and a successful and prosperous SSU [Strategic Services Unit, the "rump" organization of OSS, of which Herma was a part], or preferably a new organization, and an independent one. I understand from several letters I've had from Washington that the office is extremely busy, kicking, and not likely to die, which has made me very happy. I have had a most interesting experience here and have enjoyed it, but am ready to come back . . ." She thought it a good idea to return [redacted] which you might wish me to visit. I think that such a brief tour might be extremely valuable and beneficial to the continuation of our work." As the letter indicated, Herma had found a home in intelligence. [redacted] agreed to her itinerary. At the end of January, she returned to Washington via the suggested route.

Herma's closeness to Donovan and [redacted] is reflected at the end of this letter: "The several weeks I was able to work with General Donovan were highly stimulating, and it was very regrettable, from more than one point of view, to see him leave. He wanted to be very warmly remembered to you."

SSU, with [redacted] members, Herma Plummer included, was soon transferred to the War Department, to work under Brigadier General John Magruder. SSU was abolished on 19 September 1946, and its personnel were transferred to the newly created Central Intelligence Group (CIG). On 21 October 1946, Herma Plummer joined CIG as a GS-12. In June 1947, writing of her work in the Central European Branch, Richard Helms described her as "one of the outstanding counterespionage specialists in the Organization."

The CIA Years

In 1948, Herma was assigned to [redacted] where she conducted several important operations, including "the single most important operation run [redacted] during the past five years," according to her chief, Bronson Tweedy.

In a subsequent recommendation for promotion to GS-14, Tweedy wrote: "That Miss Plummer happens to be a woman has not prevented her from attaining a very high level of proficiency in operations and intelligence work, and the question of her sex should not enter into any considerations of her qualifications, which already merit a well-deserved promotion." She was promoted in June 1950.

After a brief stay at Headquarters, Herma [redacted] [redacted] from June 1955 through March 1956 she served as deputy chief and as chief of operations and senior case officer.

Back at Headquarters, she was named deputy branch chief [redacted] the unit responsible for operations [redacted]. One senior [redacted] chief, who began his career during this period as one of Herma's young desk officers, remembers her fondly as a supervisor who brooked no incompetence but who also took the time to act as a mentor to her subordinates. He recalls many pleasant occasions when Herma would take her brood up the street from the [redacted] where they worked to lunch at a small Italian restaurant.

In 1960, Herma became chief of [redacted]. She was described by a supervisor during this period as follows: "Miss Plummer attacks her work with great enthusiasm. Her experience has made her a genuine expert on the techniques of espionage—and what is rare among experts in this field—she manages to employ her expertise in a *non-doctrinaire, non-cultist* way. Rather, if she has any speciality in this line, it is as an exponent of common sense. She is an outstanding critic and analyst of operational situations . . . Her judgment [is] always shrewd, [and she] reserves her most exquisite scorn for colleagues who are *merely adequate*."

There were signs of some friction, however, between Herma and certain senior NE Division staff members who had "a developed tendency to impose on the branch both operational and administrative decisions." Perhaps as a result of this, she transferred in 1961 to the East European Division

[redacted] Life was more harmonious for her there, as indicated in a memorandum written in 1963 wherein the division's chief of operations noted the "responsiveness of senior division personnel to her counsel and high regard in which her professional judgment is held throughout the division."

In 1963, Herma was assigned to [redacted]

[redacted] She was indis-
pensable [redacted] be-
cause her savvy and field experience perfectly complemented his administrative background. She served as chief of operations, overseeing the work of all bases under [redacted]. She also represented the [redacted] in a wide range of useful contacts in the diplomatic community, and invitations to a Plummer soiree were prized. She used her sophistication and ability to "move" among foreigners to good operational advantage.

Despite her formidable reputation, Herma still found time to cultivate professionalism in younger officers through personal contact, as well as example. One senior Agency official recalls that whenever he would visit [redacted] during this period from his post in Eastern Europe, he inevitably would receive a call at his hotel from Herma inviting him to a meal and a chat at her elegant apartment. This officer regarded her as a role model.

Herma remained in [redacted] until 1968, when she retired from the Agency at the mandatory age of 60. After spending approximately the next three years in Washington, D.C., she moved to Switzerland in 1971, where she lived until her death earlier this year.

An Assessment

To paraphrase a contemporary, Herma Plummer was an outstanding intelligence officer. Despite her proven ability as an agent handler, her most extraordinary asset was her ability as a case or project critic. No one else could review a file and

find the holes, the contradictions, and the unasked and unanswered questions with comparable accuracy. She had a nose for phoniness, for window-dressing, for evasion, gilding and building up—for any kind of misrepresentation, witting or unwitting. This faculty was supported by an acute intelligence which made it possible for her to back up the evidence of her instincts and intuitions with arguments based upon reasonable and objective analysis. No matter what the case, her review would yield a penetrating and perceptive estimate of both the agent and the case officer and the relationship between them. This made her an ideal

[redacted]

Herma also had a striking ability to assess people. Here again was a formidable combination of intuition and instinct supported by intelligence, insight, and experience. Her chief in [redacted] related that there had been some "odd cases..both with agents and with our own personnel, and there [was] not a time when [Herma] was not way ahead of any of the rest of us in detecting the fatal deficiency and following it up until the deficiency was exposed. In several cases, both among agents and among our own personnel, the persons involved had enjoyed good reputations. They had fooled a lot of people for a long time." This same individual wrote, "... by no means least important is [her] devotion to [the Agency] and [her] dedication to the business. [She] has been at it a long time, and has had a wealth of experience. It is safe to say that this is [her] life. [She] has a high sense of responsibility, a lot of courage, and a real love and enthusiasm for the job to be done."

One colleague from the early 1950s perhaps summed up Herma Plummer best when he said she had a passion for truth. This is the essence of the woman and of the profession she represented so well. Future practioners of the craft of intelligence, if they would preserve their professional honor and integrity, should strive to emulate Herma Plummer's uncompromising passion for truth.

NOTES

1. Her job description in [redacted] was the following: "Writing of important political reports (requiring) a thorough knowledge of [redacted] conditions, political and economic set-up, translation of official notes [redacted]"

2. Letter to Messersmith, then Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, November 1938.

3. Letter to John G. Erhardt, Foreign Service Inspector, London; 9 November 1938.

4. Letter from Messersmith in Mexico, 10 April 1942, to A. W. Dulles.

5. Havana job description: "Confidential Secretary—extremely confidential work as private

secretary to the Ambassador. Thorough knowledge of political conditions, highly confidential reports to the Department of State."

6. Actually, she applied for an extended leave without pay, but Department of State regulations did not permit this. She had to resign.

7. Work description: "Handling all incoming operation reports, analyzing them, preparing disseminations to other government agencies; supervision and direction of operations in the field, training of personnel going overseas, supervision of Headquarters staff; [redacted] political movements, etc."

8. *Wild Bill Donovan, The Last Hero*. By William Cave Brown, Times Books; New York; 1982; p. 744.

9. Ibid.