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THE LISTENER

The Quest for Skorzeny

By W. STANLEY MOSS

OTTO SKORZENY must be one of the most easily recognisable people in Europe. He is a giant of a man, six foot four inches in height, some twenty stone in weight, and his handsome face is indelibly stamped from ear to chin with a deep duelling scar. And yet, at the war's end, when he was taken as a prisoner to Darmstadt Internment Camp, he felt confident in saying, 'I shall escape when and how I please, and you will never find me'. Sure enough, before a week was out, it did place him to escape and he vanished apparently without trace from the face of the earth.

'Hitler's Trigger-man'

It is perhaps not generally realised just how much Skorzeny had accomplished during the short time since he emerged from obscurity as a young Commando captain in the latter stages of the war. Not only had he played the leading part in Mussolini's fabulous rescue; he had also kidnapped Nicholas Horthy, the Regent's son, in Budapest. He had commanded a German division on the Russian front, become Chief of Commando operations in the west, and personally led the much-publicised spearhead attack in the Battle of the Bulge when he and his men disguised themselves as American troops. When he escaped from Darmstadt in July 1948, the hue and cry was immediate. He was publicised variously as 'The Most Dangerous Man in Europe', and 'Hitler's Trigger-man', and he became once more the central figure on a stage that had been almost denuded of leading players.

The generally recognised British weakness for exploring the case histories of our defeated enemies had for some time prompted me to try and reconstruct the story of Mussolini's 'Hundred Days', starting with the Duce's dramatic fall from power, and ending with his grim execution on the shores of Lake Como. With Captain Michael Luke, a friend of mine, I had planned to travel about the Continent seeking first-hand information from the protagonists of the story; and of these, it was obviously Otto Skorzeny who would have the most vital tale to tell.

Since both Michael and I had worked for secret organisations during the war, we were able through the co-operation of erstwhile colleagues to learn details of Skorzeny's present activities. He was apparently in hiding somewhere in France, and was engaged in operating an underground Nazi organisation throughout Europe. Just when we felt the moment was ripe for tackling him, however, he made the most startling reappearance. With characteristic bravado, he was sitting with a girl drinking period outside one of the smartest cafes in the Champs Elysées, when a passing newspaper reporter chanced to recognise him. With commendable journalistic astuteness, the reporter took a photograph on the spot; and that evening—it was February 13 of last year—every paper in Paris ran banner headlines to the effect that 'Hitler's No. 1 Killer' was at large in the capital. When we heard the news, Michael and I were naturally delighted, and we decided to fly to Paris on that very afternoon. It was a Saturday, however. Air passages were almost impossible to obtain, and we finally compromised by travelling seated on a crate of frozen fish in a midnight freight plane.

When we arrived in Paris we managed to find ourselves a hotel, and slept soundly until mid-morning. Then we besuired ourselves and went for a stroll along the Rue de Rivoli. Presently we stopped at a newspaper kiosk; and to our horror, the first things to confront us were two photographs of ourselves. Beneath a front-page headline, which read 'Major Moss begins his hunt for Scarface', the reporter of a national Sunday newspaper had written: 'A fast aircraft left London last night for a secret destination on the Continent in response to a sudden telephone call. It carried two young men who plan to hunt down Scarface Otto Skorzeny . . .'. Then came the photographs and a whole column of further details concerning our quest.

The references to the fast aeroplane and a secret destination certainly amused us; but, at the same time, we were afraid that this announcement would probably deprive us of any chance of finding our quarry and we were quite right: Skorzeny once again vanished into thin air, and in fact almost a further year had passed before we finally managed

to make contact with him. He himself, however, had not been the only interested person to read of our arrival in Paris on that lovely Sunday morning. When we arrived back at our hotel, the concierge told us that a gentleman had already telephoned the concierge to enquire after us. He had not left his name, but said he would enquire again shortly. The porter had scarcely finished talking when he rang at the switchboard, and our mysterious caller was on the line. He spoke French with a heavy foreign accent and refused to give his identity. We did not have a conversation: it was a matter of all he said, in no uncertain terms, was that for the good of all we should leave Paris immediately. Then he rang off.

How the man had discovered where we were living, we do not know; but this was only the beginning of such surprises. Before we were out we were visited by a person who had no mind to keep his identity a secret. He said he was a certain Captain Jacques K., a Frenchman despite his Slavic-sounding name, and that he had been one of our arrival and traced us through the British Embassy. He was a small, dark-haired man with a prominent nose and features, who displayed an almost embarrassing amount of knowledge. He told us that he had operated in Italy for a long time as a member of an organisation which he said was called 'Die Spinne', 'The Spider'—of which Otto Skorzeny was the European head. The headquarters of 'The Spider', which was under the command of Hitler's deputy, Martin Bormann, was said to be in Berlin, where a Nazi phalanx had assembled. Until the war had fallen out with the organisation as a result of financial difficulties, he had worked for it as a pilot, and would therefore be able to give us with minute details of its European structure. We were intrigued, and asked him if he would be good enough to let us have a written statement concerning his activities; and with this he was obliged to us.

The Model Guest

It was through Kaminski that we again picked up Skorzeny. To his certain knowledge, our quarry had been hiding under a name in a small hotel at Saint Germain-en-Laye just outside Paris. 'You want to find him?' Kaminski asked. 'You wish to join "Die Spinne"?' I told him no, we were just collecting material for our book. 'Whereat he slapped me on the back, and said, "I know where he is. You don't fool me. Always joking, always kidding, but you waste no time in paying a visit to the hotel at Saint Germain-en-Laye. It was a quiet, innocent-looking little place with dark wood paneling and blue shutters. Its name was "The Cedars". It had a list of bourgeois names in its register seemed incapable of concealing our secrets. Yet, in looking through the guest-book, I found the following entry:

Name:	Steiner, Rolf
Date of Birth:	December 12, 1909
Place of Birth:	Vienna
Nationality:	Austrian
Occupation:	None

Each of these details concerning Rolf Steiner perfectly fitted Skorzeny. The manager of the hotel informed us that Mr. Steiner, a model guest who had always paid his bill promptly, had apparently left two days previously saying that he would be back about a week's time. He had not said where he was going, or left a forwarding address.

We left the hotel in the near-certainty that Skorzeny would return to it, and reluctantly admitted to ourselves that we had lost track of him once more. By the happiest of chances, however, we picked up his trail again a few hours later. When we returned to Saint Germain-en-Laye, we arranged to meet an old friend of Skorzeny's, a man in service days who we hoped might be able to help us. While we were sitting together at the Cafe Flore, a girl came to us, a girl who was reputed to be a close friend of Skorzeny's. She was very pretty, with platinum blonde hair, eyes as blue as the sky.

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...and a skin so tanned as to be more appropriate than an early spring day. It was fortunate for us that this took place in that notoriously Bohemian cafe, where there is a habit of making the acquaintance of people whom you have never met before in your life. Within a short time we were chatting and, and by the most well-tried of conversational tactics we learned from her the latest news of Skorzeny's movements. 'Nobody knows where Skorzeny's got to now', said Micky and I steered the talk in the right direction. 'I do', she replied, looking very pleased with herself. 'I do'. 'He's in Rome', I rejoined. 'He's in Rome', she laughed. 'That's what you think', she said. 'I happen to know. He's in Mègeve'.

Threats

All we wanted to know. Before leaving, we arranged to meet again, hoping that through her we might meet some lead of the Nazi inner-circle in Paris; then we returned to our hotel, and went to catch the train to Mègeve. The following morning we had reached our destination in the French Alps. A whole day passed before we discovered Rolf Steiner's name in a hotel register. Our excitement was short lived. The hall porter told us that Mr. Steiner had left suddenly twenty-four hours before, leaving neither address nor instructions. We made the long journey back to Paris and returned to our hotel, where to our surprise we found the bombastic Captain Kaminski, an evil-smelling reclining in an armchair in our private sitting-room.

'I was expecting you. But you are late'. 'I will tell you that an agent of 'The Spider' organisation is in Paris from South America. If we wished to meet him, could you arrange it. Naturally we agreed; and so, after a few days, he left us, saying that he would telephone later to let us know of the arrangements he had made. An hour later, the bell rang. It was Kaminski, but we were mistaken: it was the hotel porter who brought us such an unfriendly welcome on our first visit to Paris.

Once again, it was he who did all the talking. He was sure that we had had the temerity to return to the city. 'Did you not properly understand him? Indeed, he hoped that you would be leaving his warning lightly. 'Within twenty-four hours', he said, 'you will have left Paris for good'. As things turned out, we did not return to England for six weeks, but our sinister visitor continued his belligerence to nothing more frightening than threats.

One day, Kaminski rang up. The agent from Buenos Aires, who was awaiting us at the Cafe Weber at eleven o'clock in the evening. This code name was Alfredo, and he would have with him a dog, a crap-cared boxer dog. We had no difficulty next morning in seeing our man. He was Latin in appearance, very smartly dressed in a chalk-stripe suit, Panama hat, and 'coloured' shoes. The boxer dog, which sat under his chair, regarded us with a menacing expression. We soon got him talking about 'The Spider'. He said he had left the organisation because they had not paid him adequately for services rendered; but here he mentioned that this explanation was quite untrue. We learned from other members of 'The Spider' that he had been a member of the organisation with which he had been connected. He said that as it may, the information with which he had been furnished was of a startling nature. The organisation, he said, was a front for an apparently bona fide South American export firm, the name of which I am afraid I am not allowed to mention. He provided us with a list of its directors, who undoubtedly were German in the core. This firm arranged for the transportation of goods to the Spider's headquarters of all types of recruits, including criminals. Recent arrivals had included two well-known traffic 'aces', whom we knew well by name, and who had been recruited as test-pilots at a flourishing aeroplane factory in the town. This factory, magnificently furnished with modern equipment, was run by a well-known scientist who had been recruited in Germany during the war.

He gave us details of the methods of transport used throughout Europe, the elaborate co-operation between the various branches of the organisation, and the manufacture of false documents and passports. He knew anything of Skorzeny's present whereabouts. 'I don't know', he said, 'but I am sure that 'The Spider', because Martin Bormann had only once ventured as far west as Spain; but where we could

find him he did not know. The only suggestion he could make was that we should go to Zurich in Switzerland, where the organisation's funds were deposited. It had always been our intention to go to Zurich, for we had been assured by our own colleagues that we would find much to interest us there; but before leaving we thought it wise to visit a friend of ours with whom we had been connected during our war-time secret activities and to tell him what we had learned.

A revelation was in store for us. Kaminski, we were told, was a well-known Russian agent, who for many years had worked in the major European countries—including England, from which he had been deported. His statement, moreover, was an almost direct transcription of a secret key issued by the Central Bureau in Moscow for the use of its agents. I should perhaps explain what this entails. In all probability, a Russian agent had actually succeeded in being recruited by 'The Spider' and had worked for the organisation. Having learned all that he wanted, he had escaped from it, and reported his findings to the Central Bureau, which had then formulated a key statement to be used as a passport of confidence by its agents everywhere. With slight alterations to suit his situation, an agent like Kaminski was therefore able to gain trust by appearing to have been an active member of 'The Spider'. Fortunately, one of these keys had fallen into the hands of our secret service; and we found that it tallied almost word for word with Kaminski's document.

From now on our own activities received an altogether unexpected interest and encouragement, while in this new light Skorzeny's own position became more apparent. His movements and associates were of interest to several nationalities and for different reasons. Already we had suspected that his presence in Paris could not have been unknown to the Sûreté, for he was not the sort of man to have gone long unrecognised. At the same time, the very fact that he and his associates had been allowed to live there unmolested provided the communists with a trump political card. The indulgent harbouring of a notorious Nazi killer, they said, was sure proof of corrupt and treacherous government at home, of British assent, and American support.

'The Spider's' Web

In the face of such diatribes, Micky and I soon began to wonder just on whose toes we had been treading, for it seemed that we unwittingly had been playing straight into the hands of the communists. Although we said again and again that we were only employed in writing a book, apparently no one believed us. In Zurich, Geneva, and Northern Italy, we were greeted with similar scepticism. We received anonymous telephone calls, and were visited at all hours of day or night by interested parties. Back in Paris, we continued to see Kaminski regularly, and reported each move he made to the appropriate department. We renewed acquaintance with the flashily-dressed Alfredo and Skorzeny's blue-eyed girl friend; and we met several members of 'The Spider' organisation. From them we learned the minutest details of its structure; and once, much to our amusement, we were offered the opportunity of joining it ourselves.

For Skorzeny, the pace had apparently become too hot. A letter which I had asked to have delivered to him was answered from Egypt, where he was hiding at Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo. Several months passed before he returned once more to Europe—and the last we heard of him was that he was intending to join Martin Bormann and his compatriots in South America. At the same time, as far as 'The Spider' was concerned, Micky and I went into voluntary liquidation. Like Skorzeny himself, we realised that we were being used as communist pawns, and it seemed to us that from the point of view of the Western Powers, the less information we disclosed the better.

With regard to our quest for Skorzeny, our object had been attained. We had learned more than we had dared to hope for regarding every facet of Mussolini's kidnapping, even to the extent of bringing home with us Skorzeny's personal account of his exploit. It makes a fascinating story; and perhaps, one day, I may come back to tell it.

—Home Service

The older generation which takes pleasure from nostalgia may like to dip into Cecil M. Hepworth's *Come the Dawn* (Phoenix, 16s.). Mr. Hepworth was a pioneer of the British film industry and he conjures up for us memories of Alma Taylor, the Walton-on-Thames studios and early 'silent' days. Mr. Hepworth's father, he tells us, was a photographer who spent much time with an immense camera in his back yard. He gave his son a little lathe on his twenty-first birthday as he was of the opinion that anyone who mastered the art of metal turning need never be out of a job.