

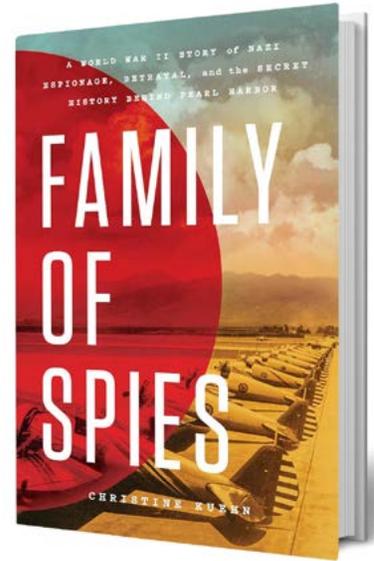
intelligence in public media

Family of Spies

A World War II Story of Nazi Espionage, Betrayal, and the Secret History Behind Pearl Harbor

Reviewed by John Ehrman

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Finding out that your spouse or another close family member is a spy is a standard plot for an espionage novel. But what happens when you make that discovery in real life? That's what we learn in Christine Kuehn's *Family of Spies*, a combination of memoir and family research. Let's just say it's not pretty.

The story begins in 1994 when Kuehn, a journalist living in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC, received a letter from a screenwriter asking for information about her paternal grandfather, Otto, who he said had been a spy for the Nazis and aided the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Kuehn's father, a German immigrant named Eberhard, had talked little about his family's past, and she had grown up understanding that her queries would be met with evasive responses. Nor did her father's sister, Ruth, ever talk much. "You have a good life," she told Kuehn, "you don't want to ruin it with the past." But the letter spurred Kuehn's curiosity and, after checking Gordon Prange's authoritative *At Dawn We Slept* (1981), she learned that, indeed, Otto had been a spy in Hawaii

for the Japanese. From there, Kuehn began tracking down the details of her family's secret past.

Much of Otto's biography turned out not to be unusual for a German male of his generation. Born in 1895 to a prosperous family in Berlin, he grew up at a time when Germany led the world in science, technology, industry, and military power. Lacking direction after high school, however, Otto joined the navy and, in 1915, was taken prisoner by the British after his ship, the battle cruiser *Blucher*, was sunk at Dogger Bank. He would spend most of the rest of the war as a POW. Things did not go much better for Otto after the war—still "aloof and unfocused," as Kuehn describes him, he sought to make money fast and took his chances on a series of high-risk business ventures. Each failed, and he gradually ran through his inheritance. In the late 1920s, however, he hit on a winner when he opened a coffee-importing business in Berlin. Stability and prosperity soon followed, and his wife, Friedel—who already had a daughter, Ruth, from a previous relationship—gave birth to Eberhard in 1926.

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Bourgeois respectability turned out to be boring, however. In 1928, Otto began working part-time in the German navy's secret police, hunting communists in the service. He turned out to be good at clandestine work and running agents. After attending one of Hitler's rallies, he also joined the Nazi party. Soon the family was all-in: Friedel joined the Nazi women's auxiliary, and Ruth, too, in 1930 entered the *Bund Deutscher Madel*. This level of commitment placed Otto in just the right position when Hitler took power in 1933, and he soon was an up-and-coming officer in the party's secret police.

But, once again, things went south for Otto. Tasked with pursuing corruption in the party, he actually tried to do so. Otto soon made enemies of high-ranking officials and narrowly escaped being murdered. But worse was to come. Otto's brother Leopold had become a deputy in Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda,^a and in early 1935 he brought Ruth, now a gorgeous 19-year-old, to a reception, where she was introduced to Goebbels, a notorious womanizer. An affair soon ensued, but ended suddenly when Goebbels found out that Ruth's birth father was Jewish.

This created problems for everyone. Goebbels had to make sure no one learned of the affair which, in the Germany of 1935, easily could have meant having Ruth killed and the rest of the family shipped off to concentration camps. But Goebbels was more clever than that and, instead, saw an opportunity to use Otto to nurture Germany's nascent alliance with Tokyo. Accordingly, he offered Otto—by now an experienced intelligence officer who also spoke English—to the Japanese and sent him and his family to Hawaii, where they could spy on the US military on Tokyo's behalf. Getting Otto to agree to the assignment was easy, as he was promised a salary and bonus totaling \$30,000 per year (about \$700,000 in 2026 dollars). Otto and Friedel left Germany in the spring of 1935, and the children followed a few months later. Everyone's problems seemed solved.

As spies, however, Otto's and Friedel's performances were decidedly mixed. They used the time-honored strategy of setting themselves up as a wealthy couple

and then befriending local and military officials by inviting them to lavish dinners and parties. They became prolific reporters, helped by Otto's winning of a US Navy contract that gave him access to Pearl Harbor. But Otto's cover businesses, like so many of his ventures, went bust, and he and Friedel began badgering the Japanese for more money to finance their high living. This, in turn, created additional problems. Their "over-the-top galas, thin covers, and suspicious trips to Tokyo" and visits to the Japanese consulate attracted the attention of military intelligence and the FBI which, aided by codebreakers' clues about an unidentified German spy in Hawaii, began an investigation. The couple soon was under comprehensive surveillance; the only thing the FBI could not determine was whether they were spying for Germany or Japan. Clueless about their exposure, Otto and Friedel carried on to the point that a Honolulu newspaper could speculate about the true nature of their activities.

Ruth, in contrast, turned out to be a natural at espionage. Then in her early twenties and a full partner in her parents' efforts, she used her looks and charm to full effect. Young and beautiful, she was in demand with US Navy officers who, Kuehn writes, "played tennis with [Ruth], took her sailing and to dances ... [and] unwittingly provided her with a good deal of information about the American Pacific fleet."

All this happens in the first half of the book but, while readers will know what's coming, Kuehn is a skilled writer who maintains the suspense of the spy story and keeps readers absorbed in the family drama. She is not an academic historian and, while her summaries of world events give the context for Otto's and Friedel's espionage, they are brief and superficial. That matters little, however, as this is a book about spies not 20th-century geopolitics, and Kuehn knows how to tell a page-turner of a story.

The best reason to read *Family of Spies* is not for the actual espionage—though Otto provides good lessons on how not to be a spy—but for the human side of the Kuehn family story. Much of this revolves around Otto, who seems mostly to have drifted through life

a. A dedicated Nazi to the end, Leopold died in the Battle of Berlin in 1945.

as a lost soul. From the start, in Kuehn's description, he not only was unable to figure out what to do with himself but also had a reckless, gambling personality. These traits led first to his failed ventures in the 1920s and then to the behaviors that attracted the FBI's attention; the time in his life that Otto had the most stability was when he was subject to the discipline of the Nazi party, although there, too, his inability to read situations and navigate party infighting nearly cost him his life. Friedel, too, comes across as a complex but weak character, by turns maternal, supportive of Otto, manipulative, paranoid, and finally foolish. Otto's and Friedel's ultimate fates, readers will not be surprised to learn, were pathetic. Ruth, who married an American after the war and returned to the United States, turned out to be the most resilient of the bunch.

Otto's espionage echoed through the generations. Eberhard was 15 at the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and, unaware of his parents' and sister's spying, had turned into a typical American teenager. He was horrified when he learned the truth and

testified for the prosecution at Otto's trial in February 1942. Allowed to stay in Hawaii with a foster family, Eberhard joined the US Army as soon as he graduated from high school and fought on Okinawa. But after the war Eberhard had almost no contact with his parents and for the rest of his life felt he had to hide a shameful, much larger truth, inventing explanations and changing the subject whenever Christine asked about his parents or growing up in Hawaii.

At bottom this is what *Spies in the Family* is about—not only how espionage can tear a family apart, but how each member copes with its aftermath. For Eberhard and Ruth, it was pretending the past did not exist. For Christine, however, it was about uncovering and confronting the past, and asking hard questions about her family's enthusiastic Nazi record and how she might have behaved had she been in Otto's, Friedel's, or Ruth's shoes. She has no definite answers, but *Family of Spies* is worth reading for anyone interested in such issues. ■