

# Notes on the Wennerström Case

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*Operational detail of professional interest in the testimony of the famous Swedish spy.*

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The story of Stig Wennerström, the Swedish air attaché who for 15 years served as a Soviet agent in Moscow, Washington, and Stockholm, has been told well from open sources, principally his own testimony, in H. K. Ronblöm's book.<sup>1</sup> From the professional viewpoint Ronblöm brings two big points out especially well—the Soviet recruiter's pitch based on the important role the Swede could play in maintaining the international balance of power and world peace, and then the permanent Soviet handler's command over him as "the best friend I ever had." Nevertheless, being written for a popular audience, the book naturally slights some details of handling technique and tradecraft revealed in the testimony that are of interest to intelligence officers.<sup>2</sup> These notes cover the most salient such features.

## **Recruitment**

The non-Marxist ideological rationale and basis for Wennerström's

recruitment is best expressed in his testimony referring to a later period. During the 1950's, he said, the Soviets had staked everything on developing an intercontinental rocket with nuclear warhead and had "consciously entered a period of weakness" in other military and technological fields, "so that in the sixties, if they survived the fifties" a real balance of power would be reached and "the quicker they could achieve a balance of power, the quicker they would be able to get ahead with insuring world peace. ... I came to feel myself a trusted member ... of a very large team that was working to get through the fifties without a war, so that the sixties would come in and the balance of power would be a real fact."

At first, however, he had dallied with adventurism. In 1948, in Stockholm, he had half-jokingly offered to give Soviet attaché Rybachenkov the location of a secret Swedish airfield for 5000 kronor. The deal was consummated, and when Wennerström was posted to Moscow at the beginning of 1949, clandestine contact with a previous acquaintance, Soviet intelligence officer Nikitushev, was arranged. Nikitushev, after sounding him out and explaining the Soviet strategic handicaps in trying to maintain world peace, took him to lunch with a general of the intelligence service, who made the formal recruitment proposal in their private conversation before lunch.

The general repeated most of what the other had said about the importance of achieving a balance of power, thanked Wennerström for his assurances of Sweden's neutrality, and said he need not be uneasy that the Russians would press him for information relating to Sweden. Then he brought out the map Wennerström had given Rybachenkov locating the secret airfield. "He thanked me for my collaboration with Rybachenkov in Stockholm, after which he tore the map up and threw it in the waste paper basket with what I should characterize as a roguish glint in his eyes." He then emphasized that for the present the most important of all tasks was to "endeavor to get hold of the principles of NATO war planning," with special attention to aerial warfare and invasion.

The general explained that the Soviet intelligence service was organized with a headquarters in Moscow which had a number of geographic sections, and the most important of these was the American. Then he asked Wennerström whether he wished to enter the service with assignment to the American section; Wennerström was free to answer the question at his leisure, if he wished to answer at all.

During lunch Wennerström made up his mind to accept the offer and did so during the serving of coffee and tea. "The particularly good meal and the joyful atmosphere" put him in a "happy and elevated frame of mind. ... Everyone had been friendly and pleasant. ... I thought the door was open for great intelligence work ... in the cold war. ... At the same time it was clear to me that this work would not be directed against Sweden."

## Testing Period

Wennerström's first mission for the Russians was to obtain the best possible contacts "within the American embassy, above all, but also other NATO embassies" and to render oral reports on his findings. At first he was asked for names, positions, personal characteristics, simple biographic data, etc., later for information on the kinds of work various individuals did, where they traveled, etc. This was his testing period. At first, he said, "I had the feeling of being accepted quite immediately. ... It proved, however, that this first impression of mine was rather erroneous. They did not have entire and complete confidence in me, but instead ... they were trying to make sure that I was really to be relied on."

Contrary to Soviet expectations, Wennerström succeeded in making good contacts at the NATO embassies rather easily and quickly. In the case of the Americans, this was due primarily to the fact that he had known one of the defense attachés "from earlier times when I had taken special care of him in Stockholm. Through him, I very quickly 'got in' at the American embassy. This embassy had a distinctly dominating position among the diplomatic corps in Moscow, and if one only secured entrée there, the rest came almost by itself."

Wennerström consciously forced the testing period to a close by photographing, during a visit to Stockholm, an important defense analysis, apparently prepared in connection with inter-Scandinavian negotiations. This document was evidently much prized in Moscow but, being in Swedish, required a crash translation effort. When he got back to Moscow, Wennerström was therefore taken to visit the photographic reports center of the American section of the intelligence service. Consisting of about 20 people, the center was set up on the assembly-

line principle. Incoming photographs, normally of English-language documents, were opened, registered, developed, copied, assembled, and classified as to the type of information in them. "When something comes in which is written in another language, the operational cycle is interrupted and one must see to it that a translation is done at another place; this was the actual reason for showing me this center." The lesson was: send everything in English except when absolutely impossible.

## Handling

Wennerström now became a fully vetted "top agent." He was assigned a code name and a general from the American section as his permanent case officer. He was made to feel—and he attached great importance to this—that he and the general formed a two-man team. "The pair-work arrangement ... is used when there is an agent from whom ... important information can be obtained and a fully qualified person who can be spared from within the service ... The pair works in more or less close contact depending on how the best results can be obtained." He said this system was used with him for 14 years and would have gone on for at least another five but for his arrest. The general was due for retirement in 1964 or 1965 "but a special arrangement had been arrived at by which he would not retire until we had finished our work together ... His increasingly wide experience and background of knowledge became very important, in that it awakened my interest, carried me along, and engendered my enthusiasm, all of which was further sharpened by his personal knowledge."

The general seems to have met more or less regularly with Wennerström in person during the Moscow period. In the subsequent Washington years there were three successive contact men, Soviet air attachés, who acted merely as live drops. Apparently no one else was witting: when the contact man became ill everything came to a halt. The general was once scheduled to come to Washington, whether legally or illegally Wennerström did not know, and meet him in a motel, but the arrangements were called off. He did meet with him, usually in Helsinki, during home leaves and his final tour of duty in Stockholm, where otherwise an air attaché again served as live drop.

# Training

Training seems to have been surprisingly scanty and casual. "There was never any thought in my case of having me undergo training. What was of value from their point of view was the knowledge and connections I had when I started out." There was only a sort of "continuous training" in "small matters ... useful in intelligence work" and by virtue of his "political and military orientation ... in an increasingly wide field" over the course of years. Even in connection with his briefing for the Washington assignment, he received from the Soviets practically no instructions on photography, methods for delivering materials, or where contacts would take place and how. As a "top agent, I was supposed to use my own resources in fulfilling my assignments."

He mentions (see below) practice in passing a roll of film during a handshake. But the only systematic instruction seems to have been given for standby radio reception in case of war. When asked to set up a receiver he made a trip to East Berlin to clarify methods of operation and get a bit of communications training. Then after buying a Hallicrafter, as suggested, and setting it up at home, he listened on a frequency schedule laid out a year in advance to messages in coded Russian every other Sunday. He transcribed these for practice, then burned them. At Moscow's request he sent in one exercise for checking.

For seven or eight months before his arrest, from about the time of the Cuba crisis, he had received no messages. (The maid heard him listening as late as May 31, 1963.) He assumed that the radio was too busy with other tasks, or perhaps Moscow did not desire to spend any more time on his training. At the time of his arrest, he had a note in his little red notebook to remind himself to ask his case officer about this matter.

## Communications in Moscow

During the testing period Wennerström met his contact in automobiles and safe houses. Nine "meeting places" were pointed out to him on a

map, all of them in central Moscow, some in small back streets or inner courts. "The principle was that Nikitushev, sitting in a car, was to wait at these places, and I was to come forward in the most convenient manner and get into the car." The contact points were changed from time to time, "not all nine at once, but one might be changed one month, and then another the next month."

The procedure varied according to the duration of the meeting. "Perhaps it would be enough if the car were merely to drive around the block. It might be enough to take a short ride into the suburbs and then come back again. But if there was need for a longer meeting, we went either to the apartment or to the villa," where lunch was frequently arranged for meetings planned in advance.

Throughout the Moscow period Wennerström and his contact had a car and two chauffeurs reserved exclusively for their use, with another car in reserve. Reserve meeting places were arranged as part of the regular procedure and "we had two reserve times after each set time." These were not determined by any standing system but decided on at each regular meeting. "For example, meeting place No. 1 on Monday; and if I could not come there it would be, for example, place 3 on Wednesday; and if I didn't come then either, then perhaps it would be place 4 on Thursday."

For his first assignments Wennerström used an oral reporting system based on notes and in so doing formed note-taking habits which were to persist to the end of his career. "I took down notes in accordance with long lists of points or items. At the meetings I reported on these items and answered any questions asked; Nikitushev took down everything. I did the compiling work at home. ... I used an apparently careless slip system of papers which after all worked quite well ... When I came home from meetings with Americans and had to recall certain data, I jotted them down; but sometimes it was a question of notes being made while one talked to one's colleagues. Eventually I had all the material I needed ... in my safe at home; often I carried it with me, in my notebook or in the main folder, that is to say, a catalog of the data I had compiled."

When he became a cleared "top agent," a special telephone service was arranged for Wennerström and his new case officer. No one not involved knew the number, and there was someone on the other end of the line 24 hours a day. Wennerström memorized the number; he was forbidden to make note of it anywhere. He was to call it only from public booths. To

insure against wrong-number connections, he was to let the phone ring three times, hang up, ring again, and pass his message without saying who he was. Conversations were to be kept as short as possible.

The two cars and chauffeurs were now so employed as to provide unscheduled or emergency contact on the case officer's initiative. Wennerström knew the license numbers and knew the chauffeurs by sight. If at any time he saw one of the cars park in front of his residence or the embassy he was to telephone as promptly as possible. If he were going somewhere, the car would shadow him, then pass him and stop at the curb so that he could see it. Ignoring both car and chauffeur, he would take this as a signal that he should telephone. If, however, the general was sitting in the car and beckoned, Wennerström should get into the car. Thus a two-way connection was provided if anything urgent came up.

## **Brush Contacts**

For passing material in Stockholm and Washington a variety of brush contact methods were developed. Such a contact with the Soviet military attaché in Stockholm took place at the Soviet consulate, where Wennerström had to go to get his visa: "It was arranged that I was to be there at a certain hour and Yacovlev was to sit in the writing room, where the delivery was made in a very plain and direct manner. It had been agreed that Yacovlev should sit there reading a newspaper ... When I passed him I simply threw a parcel ... so that it dropped on his newspaper. Thus there was no closer contact. We did not speak with each other."

Wennerström was introduced to the delivery of a roll of film during handshake by his case officer in Moscow: "The Soviet general said that it was not so easy as usually believed, and we started exercises ... He had very large hands, which greatly facilitated the procedure. After some practice we found that we had familiarized ourselves with the proper technique."

Later "the first time I met my contact man in Washington we went on and practiced [the handshake] a while. But that was more because he couldn't do it than because I couldn't. No great advanced training is

necessary, but I think two persons that had never tried it would have difficulty, since it is necessary to be able to do it when other persons are standing around who must not be able to observe anything. For example, once in Washington the delivery took place in the middle of a room right under the noses of high-ranking American officers. And that can't be done without practice. There is a little technique of taking hold of it with the little finger and the ring finger."

If more than one roll of film had to be delivered, a second handshake could be done while saying goodbye. But Soviet contacts did not deliver materials to Wennerström by this means. At speeches or demonstrations, "we stood close to each other and there was more or less of a crowd and ... an object was passed from my right hand to his left hand or the other way around."

At the Russian embassy the procedure was to "leave the object in one's topcoat and let the other party pick it up there. For example, it was indicated beforehand to the contact man where the pockets were located and which pocket was used; as a rule it was the inner pocket of the topcoat. When you went in to the reception you always had to know the number of the hook your topcoat was on. Then it was not even necessary to greet or contact the other party ... You only had to mention the number 24 or whatever it was in his hearing, and he would go out as soon as possible to pick up the object. When he came back he would nod almost imperceptibly."

When attachés were invited on trips in the same aircraft, "it was easy to deliver material. On such occasions one took safety pins to secure the material to be received or delivered in whatever pocket one desired." Sometimes the material was taken out while in the bathroom and pinned to the trousers in back. Or in town: "It had been agreed to meet while walking in opposite directions in a certain street at a certain time, or it was planned to meet in a certain section of a department store at a certain hour. There was only one thing to watch; we should look surprised and should shake hands and nod to each other and each continue on his way." In such contacts "it never happened that objects were handed over under suspicious conditions or circumstances ... One never retired behind a tree or house or in any other way separated from the group; on the contrary, the delivery was usually made in a crowd when people stood as close to each other as possible."

Even turn-overs of the local Stockholm contact were made in open

circumstances. When General Yushchenko was succeeded by General Nikolskiy, the outgoing attaché introduced his replacement in Wennerström's own office. Nikolskiy, in turn, pointed out a new contact at a party in the Soviet embassy: during a gap in the receiving line he said to Wennerström, "He stands behind you by the curtains with his arms crossed."

## Meetings

Routine meetings were usually held either in an out-of-the-way place in the city—"a street or a park where one knew by experience there were few people and where one could take a little walk together"—or out in the country. They required detailed planning as to routes to be taken, where to park, the exact time and place to meet. The Soviet general liked to combine personal meetings with his fishing trips. Then at a fixed time and place arranged in advance he and Wennerström could meet, have food and refreshments, and "sit there in quietness ... , deliver material, and discuss the time and substance of the next routine meeting."

In principle, all such meetings out in the country were held in daytime, all those in the city in the evening and generally quite late, 10:00 or 10:30 p.m. At all a danger signal was necessary: "The whole system was very simple, one should always have the left hand freely swinging back and forth as people do when they walk. If there was anything to carry, you did it with the right hand. When you believed that danger was imminent, you put the left hand into your trouser or topcoat pocket as soon as you knew that your contact had seen you." Then the two would ignore each other.

To detect or evade surveillance, Soviet embassy personnel had to make "special arrangements" when attending personal meetings. They were obliged to drive "here and there" from 2 to 5 hours. "For my part, I was not subject to such regulations, but I was told in a general way that I should leave in good time so that I would not go directly to the place but make detours, take care of suitable errands, and make sure that I was not being followed. One was not watched so much in Washington because the diplomatic corps was exceedingly large and the resources ... were very few compared to the size of the group ... The authorities had

to confine themselves to spot checks or to keeping an eye on a limited number of persons permanently."

In Stockholm, if any clandestine meetings with the local contact were necessary, Moscow was to be informed. Then the local contact could, if warranted, arrange to use one or perhaps two Soviets as decoys for Swedish security, having them act as if on important assignments but not losing their surveillants, while he himself would lose his surveillance if he still had any.

Wennerström has described one of the meetings with his case officer he held during home leave. At 8:00 p.m., a time fixed by Wennerström, both parties walked toward a given gate from predetermined points and met. Wennerström wore an easily recognizable top coat and carried a brown briefcase in his right hand. The danger signal was as usual to put his left hand into his overcoat pocket.

The meeting was held at a villa and refreshments were on the table during the business conversation. The general marked off items as each was covered. Wennerström himself now rarely brought notes to such meetings. The usual loud music played. At the end of the conversation, they burned the papers no longer needed and flushed the ashes down a toilet. Papers to be taken from the meeting they put in order and properly concealed in their clothing. Then they had a "good meal," in the course of which—"after the worst hunger had gone"—the general placed on the table a paper listing some broad political, military, and strategic problems. These points were discussed one by one during the remainder of the meal. Later there was "unplanned conversation." These discussions, Wennerström said, were "to clarify my views on certain situations in the world; they wanted my reactions to statements by well-known people ... These talks made it possible to obtain a clear picture of Russian views."

## **Employee Benefits**

During his Washington tour, the Soviet contact man brought to Wennerström standard application blanks for citizenship in the Soviet Union. The Soviet filled them out in Russian, Wennerström giving the answers as required. He never heard any more of this matter. "The idea

was that the papers should be completed and ready in the intelligence service in Moscow to make me a Soviet citizen should it be necessary."

Wennerström trusted his case officer to take care of payments into his escrow account in Moscow faithfully. "There was no reason," he declared, "why I shouldn't trust him because the Soviet intelligence service functions like precision clockwork. There is no question of cheating any of the members." In another context, "I want to emphasize," he said, "that in the Soviet intelligence service for which I worked nothing happens by chance. It is an enormous organization in which everything is regulated and set out in detail and where iron discipline is maintained so that everybody follows the directives and directions and does not improvise on his own."

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## **Bibliography**

1 Translated as *The Spy Without a Country* (New York, 1965), reviewed in *Studies X* 1, p. 93 f.

2 This is true in much less degree of Thomas Whiteside's "Annals of Espionage" in *The New Yorker* for 26 March, 2 April, and 9 April 66—the best single unclassified history of the case from the intelligence point of view.

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