

# Intelligence in Public Media

## **A Guest of the Reich: The Story of American Heiress Gertrude Legendre's Dramatic Captivity and Escape from Nazi Germany**

Peter Finn (Pantheon Books, 2019), 240 pp., endnotes, bibliography, photos, map, index

**Reviewed by Katherina W. Gonzales**

“Someone stop me; O someone please, just try and stop me.” This quote, uttered by the character Linda Seton in the 1930 movie *Holiday*, is both an apt motto and warning regarding the life Seton’s character was based on: Gertrude “Gertie” Legendre. The Broadway play *Holiday* and subsequent film starring Katharine Hepburn were based on Legendre the socialite and big game hunter of the 1920s and oddly not the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) clerk who would be captured and imprisoned by the Nazis in France during World War II. The first American female, uniformed officer to be captured by the Nazis, Legendre lived a life that could provide content for many films, but her story falls a bit short in Peter Finn’s valiant attempt in *A Guest of the Reich: The Story of American Heiress Gertrude Legendre’s Dramatic Captivity and Escape from Nazi Germany*. Although a compelling tale that helps fill the literary chasm that begs to be filled by the various and layered stories of women in the security services during World War II, Finn’s treatment of Legendre should be read more as an annotated, incomplete memoir than all-encompassing biography.

Finn, the noted national security editor at the *Washington Post*, is also the co-author of *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle over a Forbidden Book*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction. For his treatment of Legendre, Finn, a thorough researcher, organizes this book in only partial chronological order, preferring to create chapters based on geographic locations, including separate chapters for each city in Germany in which the Nazis held Gertie from 1944 to 1945. This is an interesting approach but leaves the reader a bit unclear as to who Gertie is versus where she was at any given time. Gertie, a prolific journal-keeper also wrote two memoirs that Finn relied on extensively: *The Sands Ceased to Run* (1947) about her wartime experiences and *The Time of My Life* (1987), loosely chronicling her childhood until after the war.<sup>[1]</sup> Also delving into the National Archives’s OSS holdings and German military records, Finn attempts to round out Gertie’s explorer and wartime narratives, but there is the sense that his subject, for all her words, was more adventuress than heroine. Read in this context, *Guest of the Reich* is a good adventure story of a woman who chased danger for the love of risk. For those seeking out the daring heroine and spy, a better choice is Sonia Purnell’s 2019 biography of OSS officer Virginia Hall, *A Woman of No Importance*, which is reviewed in this issue.

Finn’s begins the actual biographical details of “Gertie”—as Gertrude Ellen Sanford would be known her entire life—after the first chapter discussing the events leading to her capture by the German army. She was born to wealth in Aiken, South Carolina, on 29 March 1902, her father being the New York politician and rug magnate John Sanford. Gertie enjoyed the best schools

and excelled as the youngest of three children. Although easily able to enjoy her status as a southern socialite, Gertie from a very early age wanted adventure more than the trappings of a family. Her thirst for adventure beyond the parlors of Charleston society began when she was only a teenager, when she embarked on her first hunting expedition in the Grand Tetons of Wyoming. From this time forward, Gertie joined multiple expeditions all over the world, some of which were funded by her family, to contribute specimens to multiple museums in the United States. Although it can be more difficult for 21st century readers to appreciate big game hunting, the zeal and fearlessness of this young woman should not be underestimated for those who can place her life into the context of the time. Finn's copious quotes from Gertie's correspondence and journals highlight a woman of tenacity and bravado that would serve her well as an adult. Finn's use of Gertie's own descriptions of big game stalking gives, by far, the best insight into Gertie's character and sets the tone for the rest of his work. These vivid and often violent moments of foreshadowing are also reminiscent of the love of hunting shared by Virginia Hall.

Falling in love during an expedition to Ethiopia with fellow southerner Sidney Legendre, the couple purchased Medway, a plantation outside of Charleston, South Carolina, which the couple would visit between expeditions. This is also the home where Gertie and Sidney would have their children, Landine, born 1933; and Bokara, born 1940. Both daughters would have difficult relationships with their mother over the decades. Gertie was rarely home or emotionally available while going on adventures with her husband and during the war. An interesting take on Gertie's relationship with Bokara and the history of Medway Plantation (which Bokara inherited upon her mother's death) is available in a 2011 *New York Times* article by Andrew Rice, "Gertie's Ghost" detailing some of the more metaphysical aspects of inheriting a property once operated by slaves, as well as Bokara's quest to heal her relationship with her absent parents.

[2] Within Finn's work, the difficult relationship between Gertie and her daughters is mentioned in passing but set aside for the more dramatic portions of Gertie's life as an explorer and thrill seeker.

The bulk of Finn's book both opens and eventually excavates his subject's OSS brief work, capture, captivity, and daring escape toward the end of the war. Through the influence of friends within her social sphere, Gertie obtains an officer's commission before volunteering to the OSS in 1942. Her most important patron, David Bruce, was a key lieutenant to OSS founder William "Wild Bill" Donovan, whom Gertie cultivated in order to serve in the exciting new secret agency. Although not further explored in this book, Finn quotes a letter from Gertie to Bruce, stating that she was "already providing his agency with information on Iran and southwestern Africa" as proof of her skills in addition to her services as a fluent French speaker. Further exploration of these previous activities might have served the book well.

Gertie's position as an OSS clerk in Washington, DC, meant that she was responsible for routing classified cables throughout the OSS posts around the world. Although she enjoyed the work, according to Finn, she began to bristle at her lack of responsibility. Only a fraction of women in the OSS served overseas, while most were clerks like Gertie, stationed in Washington. Gertie became frustrated with the gender divide, stating, "What burns me up the most is the unbelievable lack of confidence in a woman's ability.... Men cannot bear to have their world encroached on by more efficient women." Although Gertie would receive glowing praise from supervisors, she remained focused on trying to serve overseas and eventually worked as a clerk in London during the Blitz, where she would also host parties during air raids and then finally to France after D-Day, where the majority of Finn's narrative takes place.

As Finn begins to chronicle Gertie's time in France, the narrative speeds up with immense

detail. During September 1944, Gertie was enjoying the liberation of Paris with OSS colleagues, as well as celebrities such as Ernest Hemingway. However, Gertie, ever the adventuress, yearned to see the front lines of the war and was afraid she would miss the opportunity before she would be demobilized. Serving nominally in uniform as a US Army officer but actually an OSS employee, she struck out with colleagues from Luxembourg City on 23 September to see if they could bear witness to what everyone believed to be the end of the war in Europe. In a jeep with four men and a driver, their car came under fire by the German Army near Wallendorf, just over the German border with Luxembourg. Pinned down by machine guns and small arms fire, the group decided on a cover story and burned their OSS identification cards next to their vehicle. As the inevitable happened and they were all taken prisoner, Gertie explained to her German military captors that she was an interpreter for the group from the embassy in Paris, a cover easily workable for an erudite woman now in the hands of the enemy. Although two of her companions would eventually perish as a direct or indirect result of this attempt to see the war up close, Gertie's fate was quite different.

As Gertie sticks to her cover story, Finn describes her regaling her interrogators with stories about her life as a socialite with important friends. Gertie's capture is eventually reported in the German press after the OSS had suppressed similar stories in US news outlets, causing pressure and some embarrassment for OSS officials who were concerned about the amount of classified information Gertie might reveal. However, these intelligence professionals were also mildly comforted that any press story by the Germans likely indicated that they did not believe Gertie to be a spy. Within the German army, opinions varied on this topic, and Finn provides ample evidence through wartime records that the German High Command was not quite sure what to make of this woman in their custody. However, her relatively high profile status as a wealthy American woman meant that she was treated well and truly as a "guest" of the German government more than a captive. Eventually making her way through the Allied-bombed countryside of Germany, Gertie was held in Dietz Castle but soon found herself in Berlin and in the hands of the Gestapo.

By this time, according to the author, Gertie had contrived a life around her cover story of being a US embassy file clerk and interpreter, stating, "I now began to think that what I was saying was really true." This being mixed in with stories about prominent US political and military figures, her interrogators, who according to Finn, were experts in espionage against the United States and Britain, eventually filed reports stating that Gertie held little of intelligence value. According to these reports, which went straight to Nazi leadership, she was more likely than not a rich American who used her influence to get a job that allowed her to travel.

As Gertie was transferred from city to city in Germany, interestingly, many conversations with her captors centered on convincing their prisoner that the real threat to America was the Soviet Union. These attempts at creating a wedge between the Allies were apparently amusing to Gertie, who stated that the United States would handle the Soviets once the war was over, but her captors persisted in the effort. Gertie's reminiscences of these events, including stays at castles and villas with "tea parties" hosted by the Gestapo are strongly bolstered throughout these chapters by Finn's use of German military records and biographies of the German General Staff. The relative ease and comfort of Gertie's life during this time is a particularly unusual portrayal of a captured OSS employee during World War II, when so many female spies were tortured or killed. In one particularly remarkable anecdote, while being held in Kronberg at the home of Heins Grieme, a German industrialist, Gertie was allowed to shoot birds with a .22 rifle for her hosts by day and drink champagne by night, while awaiting news of her expected release on the heels of the US Army advance into Germany.

Finn's narrative surrounding Gertie's eventual escape from custody is detailed but somewhat lacking in explanation, which is likely owing to his having only Gertie's version of events. In March 1945, with help from two German soldiers and in a moment that Gertie rightfully described as the scariest of her life, she leapt off a stopped train and across the border to Switzerland while another German soldier yelled for her to stop. Finn's commentary on Gertie's miraculously lucky escape is brief —Gertie's version of events and Finn's otherwise meticulous research shed no further light on the topic or why the unnamed German soldiers assisted her.

According to Finn's archival research, the Swiss and subsequent OSS reports indicated that officials believed Gertie might have become a double agent, but Allen Dulles (who conducted her debriefings in Bern) as well as her other superiors eventually believed in Gertie's contrition about the incident leading to her capture. They further accepted her singular narrative of events. Coming back to the United States under orders to remain silent, Gertie did not reunite with Sidney until the end of the war in the Pacific. Her separation from her husband and having nothing to do generated a great deal of frustration for Gertie. She was anxious to tell her story but found that the press had no interest in her accidental adventure. Additionally, the OSS refused to return Gertie's notes and diaries from her period of incarceration for quite some time after the war, citing security concerns. After Sidney's return and her eventual decision to write *The Sands Ceased to Run*, there was simply not an audience for Gertie's story in a world that wanted to move past the war. The couple would soon start going on expeditions again, but Sidney died of a heart attack in 1948, and soon Gertie was traipsing around the world alone again, exploring and cataloging for museums. Although Gertie would attempt to tell her story many times until her death in 2000, it is only with Finn's book that we begin to get a glimpse into the story of a woman whose layers remain mostly unknown, even as her most famous exploit is revealed.

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[1] Legendre's personal papers and photos are available on-line on the Lowcountry Digital Archive (<https://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/>).

[2] Andrew Rice, "Gertie's Ghost," the *New York Times*, 14 October 2011 (available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/magazine/key-gerties-ghost.html>)

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