

Captain Stephen Kalman: A Classic Write-In Case

A counterintelligence object lesson-how, without touching a pinfeather, to the goose that lays the golden egg.

The agent of an adversary service, or a person high in an adversary bureaucracy, if he wishes to make contact with another intelligence or security service, can choose from a number of different means. He can present himself physically as a walk-in. He can use an intermediary in order to retain some control, especially with respect to his own identity. He can send a messenger, make a phone call, or establish a radio contact. Or he can simply write a letter, anonymous or signed.

Cases of this kind are counterintelligence matters from the inception. The critical problem is to separate the write-ins, walk-ins, or talk-ins who are acting on their own initiative from those who are seeking contact at the instigation of the hostile service. For that reason, until bona fides has been established or can reasonably be presumed, the counterintelligence handling of the case should follow the principles of circumspection and control used in the practice of double agency. Up to that point, at least, this course is only a matter of simple common sense.

But let us examine the theory further. A provocation agent, that is a walk-in or talk-in acting upon the instruction of the adversary service, must have direct contact with the target service at least once in order to effect the provocation. The target service, if the lure has been exciting, should then try to arrange for other meetings in places under its own jurisdiction: the provoking service, it is reasoned, fearing some slippage of control during such meetings, traditionally tries to avoid them after the initial contact. This course of action may work very well with most walk-ins; but counterintelligence thinking has become so colored by walk-in theory that its lines of reasoning tend to be extended rigidly to case work on anonymous write-ins. The write-in is thus counted a provocateur although he never appears and makes the provocation. The record, however, shows no successful examples of unsolicited write-ins under adversary control from the inception. This experience suggests that there may be a basic difference psychologically between the write-in and the walk-in and, further, that the two present different problems to the counterintelligence operative and analyst, notwithstanding the

fact that they both must be viewed initially as potential double agents.

Two cases which throw sharp light on this matter have already been cited in these pages. The anonymous letter to the British naval attache in Oslo in 1939 giving immensely important information on German weapons development¹ is a good example of a bona fide write-in whose identity is still unresolved. And the write-in from the German Abwehr whom another article called "L,"² insightfully handled by the Czech intelligence service, became and remained until the end a valuable agent-in-place. A third case is the subject of this paper. Ironically linked with the successful Abwehr write-in L, it shows the damage a headquarters can do when it handles a problem blindly and bureaucratically, according to the rules—Control the agent. Identify him. Don't do clandestine work with unknown parties. Get possession of the body. Ask all the questions. You order; the agent obeys. By applying these rules, misreading the clear signs of the onetime write-in, the Germans denied themselves a source in Stephan Kalman and wrote for him his death warrant.

Frontier Defense Betrayed

From the middle of 1936 Czech military intelligence had enjoyed the services of the agent L, whom it had developed from the initial write-in and whom it numbered A-54. He was a German officer, a member of Admiral Canaris' Abwehr. He provided information of the highest order, delivering to the Czechs material of all kinds that came into his hands. During a contact in February 1937 he said jokingly, "From what I have given, you should know plenty about our frontier defenses, our Grenzschutz. Today I am going to show you what we know about yours." He handed his case officer a sheaf of documents of about forty pages; a quick glance showed it to be exceedingly sensitive material concerning the Czech frontier defense in Northern Bohemia.

L explained: "This material in its original Czech version was received by our headquarters in Berlin by mail. It had been posted in a German mail box in Eger [the Czech Cheb] on 15 October 1936. It was absolutely_ anonymous. There was no accompanying letter and no identification of any sender or his whereabouts. Our bosses in Berlin were all excited

about the importance of the material and waited for more deliveries. When none came, all of the Abwehr field posts working against Czechoslovakia,³ including mine, were sent a typewritten translation of the material and given orders to identify the knowledgeable unknown collaborator. Up to the present time, our search has been in vain." Then he added, perhaps out of spite, "I do not think you will have better luck." In this he was wrong.

What damage had been done to the security of the Czech defense by the Abwehr's unidentified benefactor? The Grenzschutz plan was a very elaborate blueprint for the defense of the border territory at a time when international political tension threatened to end in general mobilization of the armed forces or, as it did, in armed conflict. The plan contained data concerning partial mobilization, what units would be used for the defense of border areas, their operational tasks, their command organization, and their communications with higher units which would be mobilized and concentrated in operational areas. There were data concerning armaments and supplies of various kinds, and an intelligence plan for positive and counterintelligence measures to be taken immediately preceding an outbreak of hostilities. The Grenzschutz plan, an integral part of the Czech general war plan, was a thing that could not easily and quickly be altered, and its betrayal to the country's most powerful potential enemy was disastrous. By now, in early 1937, the Czechs knew perfectly well that time was running out in their conflict with the Nazis. Czech counterintelligence, therefore, had to apprehend the anonymous traitor as soon as possible. There was not much to go on, but as it turned out there was enough.

The first step was to establish whether the data in L's material were authentic. The papers were checked with Colonel Oleg Prochazka, the head of the 3rd (Operations) Department of the General Staff, who was a most upset officer when he had read them: they were genuine. They were not an exact copy of the border defense plan, but excerpts made by someone who knew the material well enough to skip the non-essentials and concentrate on what was important. They gave in full the plans for the 4th Military Division and in part those of the two divisions scheduled to operate on its wings, evidently because the 4th Division plan in fact included partial data on the flanking divisions.

Records Aid the Hunt

Internal evidence thus seemed to steer the investigation to 4th Division headquarters, but the problem was not so simple as that. Copies of the 4th Division plan were also held by the headquarters of the 2nd Army and in Prague by the headquarters of the 1st Army and the Operations Department of the General Staff. There were these four different places where the leak could have occurred, and all four had to be investigated.

What could the investigators look for? Because of the write-in's scrupulous precautions to protect his anonymity, it was concluded that he had done the mailing personally. He would therefore have had to travel to Eger, where the documents were mailed on Sunday, 15 October 1936, from his military post. Someone familiar with the plan who could have made such a trip on that date would be the man. Special permission was required to leave a garrison on Sunday, and there would be records. Saturday was a working day, and all leaves were recorded. Bigot lists ⁴ of all persons working on the border defense plans at all echelons had been maintained and were at the disposal of the investigating officers. They were thoroughgoing and fully controlled as a matter of routine. In addition to identifying individuals authorized to work on the plan, they indicated what element of it each had worked on, at what time, under whose supervision, and if after working hours on whose authorization.

The investigations at the General Staff and the 1st Army headquarters in Prague were very brief and conclusive. Copies of the 4th Division plan had been sent to these headquarters through the 2nd Army Corps in Hradec Kralove on a date well before 15 October 1936, but they were still deposited in the safes at these headquarters and no one had looked at them since their receipt. These results cut the circle to be investigated by half. Moreover, there was another reason to be thankful: Prague was so near Eger that the trip could have been made from there much more inconspicuously than from Hradec Kralove in the east, where the other two suspect headquarters were located.

At the headquarters of the 2nd Army Corps, Commanding General Tuma and Chief of Staff Colonel Cingros were not happy when informed about the investigation. Counterintelligence officers from Prague were commonly referred to as "the Blackbirds"; even among friends they always brought bad news. But this time they caused no great trouble.

In peacetime, the 2nd Army Corps was purely an operational command having some administrative functions and a small number of personnel. Its job with regard to the border defense plan was limited to commenting on the work of subordinate divisions and ordering the proper corrections and readjustments. It was found that only four people had engaged in this work—the commanding general, the chief of staff, the head of the operations section, and a junior officer: who had typed the orders issued to subordinate units. All four were eliminated after careful examination of the records: of the critical days of 14, 15, and 16 October none of them had been absent from the command.

It was now clear that the investigation must concentrate on the headquarters of the 4th Division itself. Commanding General Kutlvaser and his chief of staff, Lt. Colonel Chleboun, refused to believe that such a horrible betrayal could have been committed in their headquarters, but they cooperated zealously, providing a list of all staff members who had worked on the plan. It was very quickly ascertained that one of these, Staff Captain Stephan Kalman, had taken a leave of absence from 12 to 16 October and spent it in the small village of Nyrany, near Pilsen, in Western Bohemia. Pilsen is about half way from Prague to Eger, three hours short by train.

Kalman, attached to the operations section, had had the Grenzschutz plan as his main assignment for nearly two years; he was familiar with all its details. A bachelor of 28 years, he was a graduate of the War College in Prague. By family background he was Hungarian, and he spoke Czech, Slovak and Hungarian fluently. His father was a prosperous merchant living in Levoca, a small town in Eastern Slovakia.

A check into every other lead at 4th Army left Kalman the only suspect. It was decided that he should be taken to Prague, ostensibly for important consultation. The Czech officer conducting the investigation found him to be a handsome young man of medium height, muscular, with a dark complexion and bright black eyes, immaculately dressed and self-possessed. When told to come along to Prague immediately, without taking time to go either home or to his office, he was absolutely unmoved. He gave the impression that he would be a difficult man to break.

In Prague, the chief of the Czech General Staff, General Krejci, gave orders to get a prompt confession and conviction of the criminal and his accomplices, if there were any, but he forbade the counterintelligence

officers to use any illegal coercion to elicit the confession. He himself set about attempting to discover who in the General Staff or at the Ministry of Defense had been responsible for letting Kalman into the War College; it had been customary, though there was nothing in writing, not to admit candidates with German and Hungarian backgrounds into the highest military school. He found that all departments of the General Staff had been against Kalman's nomination but that the Office of the Minister of Defense had made the decision to admit him after strong intervention on the young man's behalf by a powerful denominational political party.

The Quarry at Bay

The interrogation concentrated, naturally, on Kalman's whereabouts during his October 1936 leave and especially on his alibi for 15 October. At this point he was not told anything about the suspicion he was under, and he did not ask. His apparently indifferent acceptance of interrogation and confinement tended to strengthen the presumption of his guilt.

He maintained steadfastly that he had spent the whole time at Nyrany, leaving for Hradec Kralove via Prague on the morning of 16 October. This statement was easily checkable at the Nyrany garrison, because regulations required every military man away on leave to report to the nearest garrison headquarters on the first and last days of his absence. Kalman had duly reported his arrival on 12 October, but he had registered for departure not on the 16th but on the 14th. When faced with the discrepancy he said that since the 15th was Sunday and he intended to leave early Monday morning, he had no alternative, with the offices closed on Sunday, but to report departure on Saturday the 14th. This explanation was air-tight; if the timing was a part of the original scheme it had been well thought through.

Where did he stay in Nyrany and with whom? At these questions Kalman became stubborn. He said he had been with a girl friend with whom he had had a long-time affair, that she was married, and that therefore as a gentleman he could not give her name or address. For four days he persisted in this position. He finally had to be told that he was

suspected of high treason of which he could clear himself only by cooperating and that his desperate situation precluded the luxury of acting the gentleman in this matter. He then yielded and the young married woman he identified was brought to Prague. After a relatively brief interrogation she admitted having been Kalman's mistress and confirmed his story except in one particular: he had left Nyrany Sunday morning, saying he had to be at his post the next day. Confronted with this significant contradiction, Kalman was not even embarrassed. With composure and nonchalance he acknowledged that he had indeed left Nyrany on Sunday. He had gone to Prague, he said, to spend a gay bachelor's day, something he obviously could not tell the lady. He then went into lengthy detail about restaurants where he had eaten there, a soccer game he had attended, and his evening of nightclubbing. He was unable, however, to name any person who could back up his statements. The remainder of the night he said he had spent with a woman he had picked up at a nightclub; he did not know her name or address. It was clear that he was lying, but it would be very difficult to prove it. Kalman, an intelligent man who by this time knew he was fighting for his life, managed to keep his composure with an incredible self-possession and impertinence. There was no trick of the interrogator's art that could put him off his guard. He played the innocent man under horrible suspicion because of circumstances purely coincidental. He repeatedly cited in his own defense the excellent ratings he had received from all his superiors during his military career. The only thing he did not do—and this kept his interrogators keen on their task—was to voice a natural complaint about what was being done to him. He knew that he was being held in custody long beyond the period prescribed by law. He was being denied any distractions such as reading, radio, and exercise; he had been hermetically separated from the outside world. Yet he accepted all this as matter of course, outwardly a very calm man without worries or disturbances.

By the tenth day the frustrating interrogation was beginning to wear down the accusers, and the Chief of Staff was becoming impatient with their progress. As a device for psychological pressure, Kalman's guards were therefore ordered to handcuff him for the night. The next day he appeared tired, depressed, and nervous; possibly he had concluded from the handcuff treatment that more was known about him than had been revealed. In order to exploit this psychological break everyone was sent out of the room and the interrogator began to talk to him in a sentimental, liturgic tone. He spoke about Kalman's father, his mother, his youth, about the country that had given him everything a young man

could expect. He drew quotations from philosophers and classic writers to add weight to this thrust at the emotional target.

Kalman listened, he did not interrupt, and at the conclusion he was obviously moved. When he was asked if he had anything to say, there was a long silence. Asked again, he said after some hesitation, "Not yet." The interrogator left him with the word that he should call any time there was anything he felt he could talk about. At midnight, through the duty officer, Kalman asked to see the interrogator alone. "All right, I did it," he began, and made a full confession.

When queried about his motives, he gave a long, unconvincing account of unsatisfactory relations with his military chiefs. It was pointed out to him that no one would betray his country for mere personal vengeance, but the subject of motivation was not pressed.

The Crime Reenacted

Kalman described his act of treason in great detail. As the general staff officer in charge of work on the defense plan he had plenty of opportunities to make the excerpts. When they were complete he decided to hand them over to the Germans. To the question, why to the Germans rather than the Hungarians, he replied that he considered the Germans more serious than the Hungarians, and moreover the trip to Western Bohemia was shorter and more inconspicuous than one down through Moravia and Slovakia. He had left Nyrany early in the morning on the 15th and gone to Pilzen, from where he caught the afternoon train for Eger and arrived about 5 o'clock.

He knew that half of the railway station was under German jurisdiction. Border controls were superficial and concentrated on those traveling on by train. He crossed the dividing line between the two parts of the station without difficulty and mailed the envelope in the first post box he saw. He had addressed it to "The Chief of the Abwehr, Berlin, Germany," with no return address. He had been doubtful about how much postage to put on the envelope because it was quite heavy; he had used a stamp of three times the value required for a normal letter, hoping this would be satisfactory. He then took the next train to Prague, sure that no one had seen him who could identify him. He reached

Prague in the early hours of 16 October and at 10 o'clock went on to Hradec Kralove.

He had been completely satisfied with his performance; he could not find any weak point in the whole scheme. He was convinced that nobody would ever discover how the mailing was done or who had done it. He began work on a new assignment and tried to forget about the incident completely.

This confession, once it had started, had been practically a monologue. He was now asked why he had delayed it so long and why he had chosen midnight to make it. He answered that his behavior during interrogation was the result of his instinct of self-preservation and the conviction that he had not made any mistake in planning and executing the deed. He acknowledged that he had been astonished when he was picked up and taken to Prague. But he was unable to figure out how he could have been traced, and he hoped that by denying everything he could save himself. Later, when he was held in custody against regulations, he had become uncertain and began to suspect that the authorities knew more than he had been told. The handcuffs had broken his resistance. The timing of the confession was a sentimental matter: he did not want to spoil his mother's birthday, which happened to fall on that day, by the admission of his crime.

Kalman now became cooperative, though not repentant. A copy of the defense plan was brought in, and he pointed out the items he had copied literally and those he had supplied in extracts. What he acknowledged having sent to the Germans appeared to amount to more material than L's report contained, but the basic items were identical. Denying that he had had any accomplices or assistants, he argued the point with logic: a primary guarantee of his own safety, as he had planned it, was the absence of anyone else in the know.

Although cooperating otherwise, Kalman stuck to his original clearly false statement about the motive for his action being personal hatred for his superiors. He answered all questions regarding the betrayal of other materials with a categorical negative, maintaining steadfastly that he had mailed only this one letter and that he had no intention of doing anything similar in the future. He stressed again the importance of his security in this connection.

"Long Live Hungary"

The interrogation had lasted about fourteen days, the whole investigation about three weeks. Kalman was remanded to the judicial authorities for trial. Counterintelligence officers would not be able to present information in court or supply as evidence the material he had delivered to the Germans; the case had to be based almost entirely on his own confession. Would he decide at the trial to retract it, claim that it was forced from him by illegal means? If he did., there would remain only circumstantial evidence.

In court Kalman refused to procure counsel, saying he would defend himself; but in accordance with Czech law an ex officio counsel was appointed, an elderly attorney of apparently mediocre ability who seemed to have little interest in the case. The presiding judge, on the other hand, had little understanding or sympathy for the security needs of an intelligence service; Kalman was his first espionage case. The trial was held in camera, however, the standard practice when secret matters of national defense were involved, and the court agreed to accept a recorded confession in Kalman's own words and voice. Military experts from the operations and intelligence sections were present to inform the tribunal what secret information had been betrayed and to what extent the security of the nation had been put in jeopardy.

Kalman pleaded guilty. The opening speeches of the prosecutor and the defense counsel followed, the first vigorous and almost passionate, the other weak and unmoving. There were a few witnesses—Kalman's girl friend and his superior, Colonel Chleboun, who made a poor showing. Finally Kalman himself testified. He admitted everything as charged. He answered all prosecution questions promptly and without hesitation except those concerning his motivation; he refused to elaborate his brief statement that this was a personal matter. After closing speeches by the two counsels and a short deliberation of the court, he was sentenced to death by hanging. He took it very calmly. He made an unsuccessful appeal only upon the insistence of his family. His request to be shot rather than to be hanged was denied. Also denied was an appeal to the president for a reduction of sentence. On the day preceding his execution Kalman wrote three letters. Two of them, one to his lady and one to his parents, were what could be expected; but the third, addressed to his interrogator, was of quite different character and

content. In it he complimented the interrogator for the skill and craftiness with which he had conducted the investigation. The letter concluded: "This time you and your side won. But the time is near when justice will prevail. This unnatural and artificial state of yours will disintegrate, and my countrymen living in it will be free at last."

Kalman thus revealed, just a few hours before his execution, the real motive for his anonymous service to the Abwehr. He went up to the gallows with swift steps, as if he were on a tennis court. He was inattentive and impassive during the unnecessarily long reading of the sentence and its rationale, although several soldiers of the assisting company fainted from the tension of this ritual. As the executioner put the noose on his neck, the prisoner cried out in Hungarian, "Eljen a haza," "Long live the Fatherland!"

Moral of the Story

What conclusions can be drawn from the Kalman case? His betrayal inflicted practically irreparable damage on the defense of the country. The controlling bases of any defense plan-terrain and strategic and tactical aims-do not alter, and plans resulting from study and analysis over a period of years cannot be changed unless the whole strategic idea is changed. That is practically impossible unless the basic motivants are altered by shifts in alliances, radically different fortifications, or other changes of a major order.

One conclusion derives from positive and negative aspects of the Czech performance with respect to security. Security applies on every echelon of command. There is no place for laxness, even if it may seem overbureaucratic and ridiculous. The application of security measures has to be executed precisely in every detail. There is no place for overconfidence in friends and old acquaintances. That Kalman, with his alien loyalties, came to be trusted with sensitive materials is evidence of such overconfidence. That he was able to make excerpts from the secret plan and smuggle them out of the office may show negligence in the administration of controls. But on the other hand the scrupulous maintenance of records regarding access to the plan and the whereabouts of personnel made an effective counterintelligence

investigation possible.

Another conclusion affirms the considerations concerning write-ins with which this essay began. Kalman had been able to carry out almost a perfect write-in operation. From his point of view everything was perfect; and it is to be underlined that instinctive concern for his own security governed the methods he used and the decisions he made. The weakness was not with Kalman but with the recipient of his information. The Abwehr, experienced and with a long tradition, committed a serious error, or rather two errors, except for which the betrayal would never have been discovered.

Its first error was not to be content with what it got, important as it was. It wanted more and quickly, and it wanted to know the identity of the informant. Its zealousness is understandable, but the main point in this whole case history, to be noted by intelligence and counterintelligence officers alike, is that such zeal can lead to the destruction of the source itself. The anonymous informant, the write-in, is not an unusual interpersonal or social manifestation. His information has to be checked, normally with double thoroughness; but the reason for his anonymity is usually a matter of security, and a crude attempt to identify him may be the first step toward disaster.

In the Kalman case the Abwehr compounded its mistake by inordinately widening the circle of people who knew of the source's existence. Its distribution of copies of the windfall to three field posts increased the knowledgeable number at least by eight, at echelons where security is never absolutely tight. The place for any inquiry into the source of the letter should have been Berlin, where it arrived. An examination of the contents there, done by one or two competent officers, would have shown it to have originated in the 4th Division at Hradec Kralove. This achieved, it might have been possible, with skill and patience, not only to identify Kalman but to persuade him to continue his collaboration.

1 Intelligence Articles VI 3, p. 57.

2 "The Shorthand of Experience," Intelligence Articles III 2, pp. 105-127.

3 Breslau, Dresden, and Munich.

4 Lists of those having access to sensitive information. The term has been most widely used in connection with Operation Overlord the plan for the 1944 landings on the French coast.

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