

Russian spy in the Cotswolds Who sent her reports back to Moscow via her washing line

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by Anne McElroy

ON a hot summer's day in 1949, a woman with a broad smile pushes a bicycle along a quiet lane deep in the Oxfordshire countryside. With her is a nervous-looking man with intense brown eyes. Passers-by notice the couple holding hands.

Yet far from being innocent start-crossed lovers they are two spies, serving Stalin's military intelligence by surreptitiously slipping some of our vital nuclear secrets to Moscow.

The 'romance' is a cover for controller and agent. The woman is Sonya, the code name of Ursula Kuczynski, of the GRU (Soviet military intelligence) - a German-born illegal living undercover with her British-born husband Len, also a Soviet spy. She sends secrets back to Moscow with the help of a specially adapted washing line.

German in Klaus Fuchs, also a physicist working on the Atom Bomb project.

At the heart of it is the manufacture of pure uranium-235. Tube Alloys would go on to become the basis of the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, which developed the first nuclear weapon. Its betrayal by Fuchs gave Moscow a leap forward worth at least two years in its nuclear programme.

MIS was told about the danger but failed to act

sheep-skinning service and commuted to a prison. The prisoners were cooked by a single inmate. Prominent artists including Piet Mondrian, Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore gathered in the basement Isobar restaurant. Had communism ever amounted to more than misery in practice, it would have looked a lot like the carefree life of the Isokon - a fact reflected in a good deal of the high-minded conversation of those who gathered there. For as the recently opened MIS files make clear, the flat attracted not just the artists and intellectuals, but Soviet agents.

In the period between the end of the 1930s and 1950, more than 20 agents and informers were living in or visiting the building. The story begins with the arrival in 1933 of Jürgen Kuczynski in London. An economic statistician in his late 20s, he had fled from Nazi Germany and had firmly allied to the communist cause. He would soon be resident at the Isokon.

David Burke, a Cambridge historian who has accessed Soviet files, is in no doubt that Kuczynski arrived in Britain with a mission to establish networks. And in this, he was ably assisted by his sister Ursula, code-named Sonya. Sonya had learned her spy trade during undercover in Manchuria. Now she undertook to help Kuczynski set up a network of agents in the village of Great Rollright, near Chipping Norton.

Russian archives confirm that it was Kuczynski who introduced Fuchs to his sister. The two would meet for long walks, or she would receive coded information marked in magazines, which he would toss over Harwell's wire fence in the darkness. Sonya's reports were redacted in by way of an elaborate disguise and were firmly concealed in the washing line in her garden.

Intuitively, we have unearthed a report from archives showing that Oxford City Police picked up signs of wireless activity - strictly forbidden in wartime - in 1943 and contacted MIS. 'The most interesting point appears to be their possession of a large wireless set and you may think this worthy of further enquiry,' the police wrote. No such enquiry ensued.

Neither did SIS pay heed to signals intercepted by the staff called Millicent Bageot, the strait-laced Harwell, later settling in the idyllic village of Great Rollright, near Chipping Norton. Russian archives confirm that it was Kuczynski who introduced Fuchs to his sister. The two would meet for long walks, or she would receive coded information marked in magazines, which he would toss over Harwell's wire fence in the darkness. Sonya's reports were redacted in by way of an elaborate disguise and were firmly concealed in the washing line in her garden.



SECRETS: Ursula Kuczynski, far left, lived near the village of Little Rollright, above. Centre: The Isokon building was home to Soviet agents, while Agatha Christie, left, also lived there when she wrote a spy novel in 1944 to 1946 working with the American Atomic Research department in Los Alamos.

By the time he returned to Britain, he was a marked man. Arrested at the end of 1949, he was put on trial in January 1950 and served nine years in prison, before being allowed to emigrate to East Berlin before his trial. Sonya escaped to East Berlin. Jürgen did the same. In a somber statement to the House of Commons, Prime Minister Clement Attlee described the Fuchs affair as 'a most deplorable and unfortunate incident', but added that there was

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no evidence to suggest any wrong-doing on the part of MIS.

It was a very British way of describing an outright failure by the security services. The consequences of their betrayal resonated across the world. Calling up with Alexander's bomb capblowing in his vest, the defence to become involved in the Korean War and emboldened his successor Nikita Khrushchev to challenge the West during the Cuban missile crisis. In 1990, I was one of the first

journalists to speak to Sonya - now known as Ruth Werner, the fifth known name of her extraordinary covert career - in East Berlin. Perverly intelligent, she was interviewed when she thought questions stirred too close to old secrets. 'I was born in a small village in my month', she once chided me in an old German saying adding: 'And what you want is more information. On more friendly days, we would chat over tea and home-made cake in her kitchen (her tea-towel bearing the motto 'Workers Of The World Unite').

When historic Soviet military intelligence documents began to leak out in the early 2000s, it became clear that Sonya had not disclosed anything like the full extent of her work as a controller of British spies.

We now know that she was also the controller of Melina Norwood, the longest-serving British spy for the Soviets, whose betrayal was only unearthed in 1999. She was dubbed 'the spy who came in from the Co-op'.

One of the strangest twists in the Isokon tale is provided, apparently enough, by crime novelist Agatha Christie, who lived at the Lawn Road flats between 1941 and 1948; here that she wrote her spy novel *N or M?* featuring German-Jewish Marxist revolutionary the penetration of British intelligence by hostile forces.

Half a century later, I sought out Jürgen Kuczynski in East Berlin. Sitting in his vast library, he joked that he had 'The Economist' magazine delivered by special permission, 'because you have to know what the capitalist enemy is thinking'.

He still enjoyed Agatha Christie novels, he noted with a twinkle. 'I never know who the murderer is.'

● Anne McElroy is senior editor at *The Economist*. Her documentary, *Knowing Jürgen Kuczynski*, is on Radio 4 on Tuesday at 4pm.