

By Ann Hughes

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ROYAL OAK, Md. — If walls could talk — and local rumor has it that thanks to the magic of electronic bugging, these walls once could — what tales Ashford Farm could tell.

The sprawling, old mansion, tucked away on the edge of Maryland's Eastern Shore, out of sight of neighboring estates and reachable only by a winding, one-lane access road about a third of a mile long, was once one of the "safe houses" used by the Central Intelligence Agency to house important defectors from communist countries.

In its time it has shielded from prying eyes such guests as East German atomic scientist Heinz Barwich, KGB defector Peter Derabin and Reino Hayhanen, another KGB defector who was the chief witness against Soviet master spy Col. Rudolph Abel. Others have included lesser-known Russians, Poles, East Germans, Chinese and Bulgarians who were on the lam from their native lands.

Francis Gary Powers also stayed there briefly after the Soviets traded the captured U-2 spy plane pilot back to the United States in return for Abel. In fact, it was Powers' presence here, while the nation's press was engaged in an all-out attempt to find him, that finally blew Ashford Farm's cover.

Today, Ashford Farm, with its park-like setting of 62 acres overlooking the tidal Choptank River

Ashford Farm, by AP

The House That Hid The CIA's Secrets

Post 8/26/81

Now No One Wants That Eastern Shore Mansion

near the point where it spills into the Chesapeake Bay, is up for sale.

For the truth is that Ashford Farm is something of a white elephant. It has been vacant, except for a caretaker couple, since 1976, when the CIA apparently decided the house was too far from Washington or had become too well known and turned it over to the General Ser-

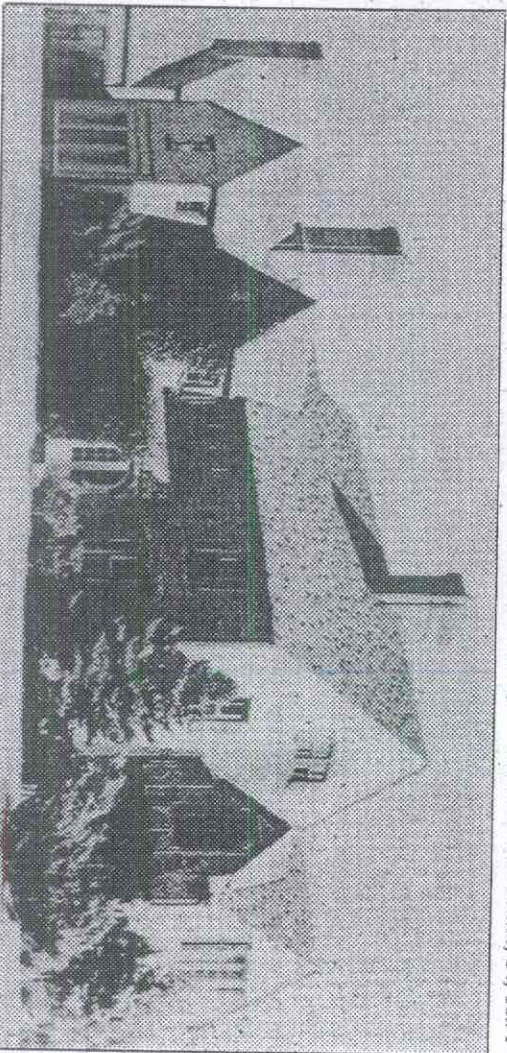
vices Administration, the official agency for disposing of government-owned property. The GSA has been trying unsuccessfully to unload it ever since. It's willing to give the place away if it could find a suitable nonprofit organization to take it.

A room-by-room inspection reveals some of the reason. The red-brick main building is certainly big

enough — 8,688 square feet of floor area on two floors, with eight bedrooms and seven baths, plus a four-car garage. But its architectural style can best be described as "bad bogus Tudor." The once impressive circular driveway in front of the mansion is now almost completely grassed over. The roof of the house leaks, the green-painted wood trim is peeling, and the interior walls seem to have been finished by spreading a stucco-like substance over wallboard so thin that in places the seams are visible. Just to keep the place from deteriorating further costs the government about \$18,000 a year.

Nevertheless, the four auctions of the farm conducted so far by the GSA have attracted more than 60 bidders. Some of the bids, such as

See ASHFORD FARM, B4, Col. 1



ASHFORD FARM, From B1

those of John R. Porter of Severna Park, Md. (\$210), and Eugene Batis of San Francisco (\$10), apparently were based on a mistaken belief that the government was so desperate to dispose of the property that it would sell at any price. Most of the other bids were at more realistic levels, although not quite up to the GSA's own undisclosed estimate of the farm's true value. A local real-estate man believes Ashford should sell for \$475,000 to \$550,000.

There was one successful bid — of \$550,000 — in 1979 by A.G. Proctor Inc., a Georgia real-estate firm. "We brought it for speculation," says A.G. Proctor, the firm's head. Then, he says, Hurricane David "came and took about 800 feet of the shoreline" — leading to the discovery that an estimated \$800,000 was needed to protect Ashford's 3,600-foot frontage on the Choptank River.

Proctor backed out, and the GSA says it then spent about \$100,000 on riprap (stone revetment) to protect the house. Unriprapped shoreline continues to fall into the Choptank, giving pause to prospective buyers.

A Vacant Estate

For much of its existence, Ashford has stood vacant. It was built in the late 1920s by a family that came from Pittsburgh. "The man who built it had a mortgage, and he couldn't keep up the payments. For about 20 years nobody lived in it. Then my parents bought it from the bank for about \$35,000 or \$40,000," says John Todd, a local resident. He says his mother "just bought it to kind of fix it up" and kept it only a year or two.

The CIA entered the local scene in 1951 when Peter Sivess, now retired from his job as head of the CIA's alien branch, bought Ashford for the agency from the Todds for \$65,000.

Most of the time Ashford Farm was run by a succession of CIA resident managers. Sivess would come out from Washington when there was a special problem or an important defector, and his wife and son once lived at the mansion for a year and a half when his own home in Cheverly, Md., was being occupied by a diplomatic defector.

Sivess, a big, gruff man whose long government career, first with

the Navy and then the CIA, was preceded by 2½ years as a pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies, has vivid memories of many of the government's guests from overseas who were put up at Ashford Farm. Some were "phonies," he says, and "some of what we learned was garbage. One fellow gave us stuff he read in a book."

The Defectors

Furthermore, Sivess says, "there's got to be something wrong with them someplace" or they wouldn't have defected. "Anybody who sells his country down the river is a snake," he adds.

There were behavioral problems, too. Sivess remembers one KGB defector who put away 30 ounces of vodka a day and had a wife who was hooked on peach brandy. "A couple lost their marbles," he says, and some re-defected. They learned that America "is not a paradise," he observes.

Sivess' wife, Eleanor, was sometimes pressed into service to deal with difficult wives. She recalls an East German woman who had married a Soviet officer she had met as a maid in the officers' barracks. The woman was difficult to deal with at Ashford, refusing to obey her doctor's orders after a complicated childbirth. "That woman could very well have been a lady of the street," says Eleanor Sivess matter-of-factly.

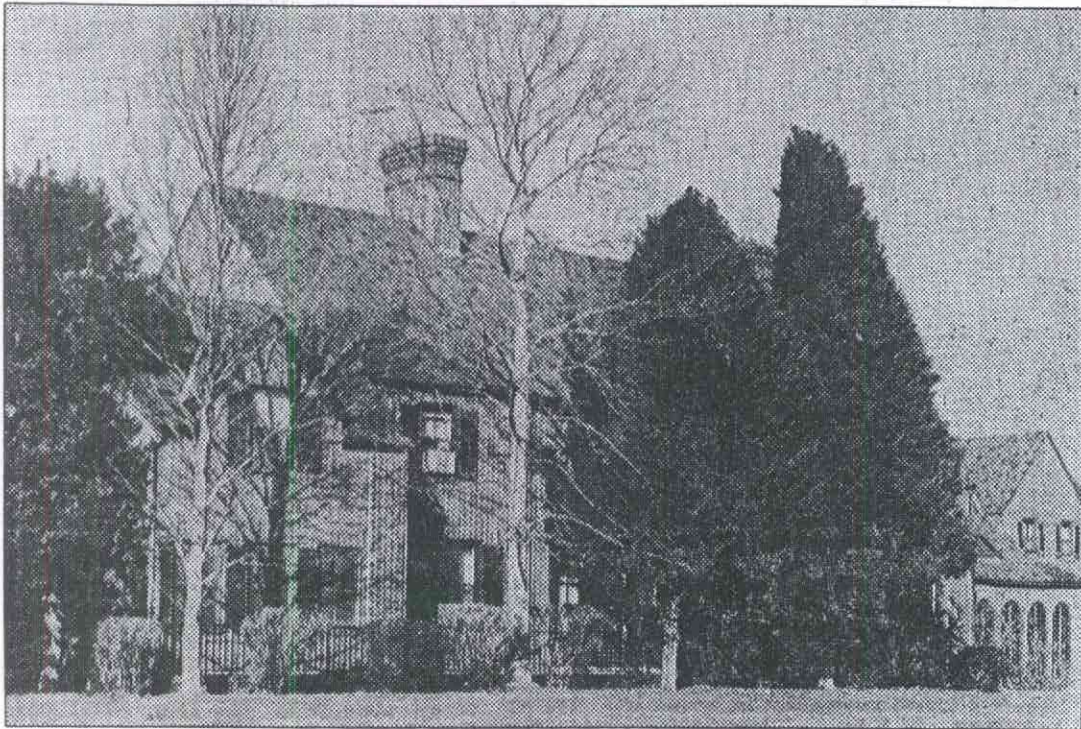
Sivess says he ran Ashford "on a shoestring," furnishing it with secondhand furniture and getting its transient residents to help out by painting, gardening and raising chickens and pigs. "They had good food and clean beds," says Eleanor Sivess. Peter Sivess indicates that the Spartan way of life was by design, since his job was to get his charges "off on their own as quickly as possible." They were tutored in English and often coached for job-hunting efforts.

Some became friends, particularly Nicholas Shadrin, a Soviet naval officer who defected in Poland with his wife-to-be in 1958. Shadrin eventually went to work for the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency and then is said to have become a double agent for the FBI before he disappeared in 1975, presumably kidnaped by the KGB. Although Sivess concedes that Shadrin may have been a Soviet agent all along, he says, "He was practically a member of my family. He was my type, an outdoorsman.

"We hunted. We fished."

After Shadrin's disappearance, Sivess says he was hunting near Ashford and encountered "a big beautiful buck" of trophy quality. He couldn't shoot it, he recalls, because "it reminded me of Nick."

Eleanor Sivess interrupts her husband: "I wouldn't tell that story too many times. They'll think you are loony."



Rear view of Ashford Farm in Talbot County, Md.; by AP

It was common knowledge in the community that Ashford was government property. There was a chain-link fence around the place, but it was covered with honeysuckle and there were no guards or anything to suggest heavy security. If the local residents were curious about the comings and goings at the farm, they rarely displayed it.

Hot on the Story

All that changed in 1962 after Francis Gary Powers, who had been convicted of espionage in Russia after his spy plane was shot down, was released by the Soviets and secretly brought to Ashford. Mary Swaine, a free-lance writer who was then a reporter for a Baltimore radio station and a stringer for the Associated Press, dryly recalls that "the press was most anxious to get hold of Powers."

Swaine, who still lives in the area, says that while the press was chasing various leads about where Powers might be sequestered, "the government grandly — and I mean grandly — announced that Powers was se-

cluded at a secret hideaway on Maryland's Eastern Shore. I thought, boy, I bet he's right down there at Ashford Farm."

Swaine alerted the AP about her hunch and began investigating. Then the government released a photograph of Powers that also showed a distinctive upside-down, L-shaped door hinge and patterned curtains — the same curtains that the Todds had put up a decade earlier. The unusual hinge and the curtains were identified. The cat was out of the bag.

Sivess, for his part, remembers being sent to Ashford to "keep the reporters at bay." Powers was quickly moved elsewhere when the story broke.

Swaine, meanwhile, wondering whether Powers' wife had been left behind, returned to Ashford. As she crept toward the house through the underbrush, she says, she saw two men and a gun. "The first shot rang out and I hit the dirt," she says. "To this day, I have never been back down there."

Sivess pooh-poohs the idea that someone shot at Swaine. If she heard

a shot, he says, it must have been his young son playing with an air rifle. "Air rifle, my eye," says Swaine, laughing.

By the time Sivess retired in 1972, the CIA was using Ashford mostly for training and conferences. At one point there was talk that Maryland might want to use the property as a residential facility for alcoholics. But Ashford's current caretaker, gesturing in the direction of neighboring estates, says, "They are moneyed people. They won't let them come down here."

Currently, the U.S. Department of Education is reviewing applications from nonprofit organizations to which the property might be deeded. One proposes to turn Ashford into a center for runaway youths. Another came from a Montessori school. If none of the proposals is approved, Ashford will go on the auction block for a fifth time.

"I wish somebody would buy it and get it back on the tax rolls," says Albert Wood, the Talbot County manager.

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