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A Whole New Ballgame

THE CATCHER WAS A SPY The Mysterious Life of Moe Berg

By Nicholas Dawidoff
Pantheon. 453 pp. \$24

AFICIONADOS addicted to long strolls through *The Baseball Encyclopedia* are most unlikely to pause for long at the entry for Morris "Moe" Berg. To be sure, he somehow managed to hang on in the big leagues for 15 years, beginning in 1923 with the Brooklyn Robins (as the Dodgers were then known) and ending in 1939 with the Boston Red Sox. But in all that time, Berg managed to accumulate a career average of only .243, to hit only six (!) home runs and to score only 150 runs, i.e., an average of 10 runs per season. No plaque in the Baseball Hall of Fame is reserved for Moe Berg.

It's a pity that we don't have an Odd Ducks Hall of Fame, for Berg would have been admitted—with full honors and fanfare—many years ago. To call Moe Berg a baseball player is to call Thomas Jefferson an architect; it only scratches the surface of the truth, and in Berg's case it leaves untouched the oddest parts of all. Moe Berg was a practicing eccentric who just happened to find, in baseball, a home of sorts, a base from which he struck out, in Nicholas Dawidoff's apt phrase, upon "a life of wandering curiosity."

In the course of his roving Berg touched down occasionally in the Nation's Capital. Washingtonians blessed or cursed with exceedingly long memories will recall that Berg spent a few seasons in the early 1930s at Griffith Stadium as a member of the Senators, who from time to time actually permitted him to play a game. It was during this stretch that Shirley Povich of *The Washington Post* remarked, to a Senator named "Sheriff" Harris, that Berg could speak seven languages, a bit of information that prompted one of baseball's immortal retorts. "Yeah, I know," Harris said, "and he can't hit in any of them."

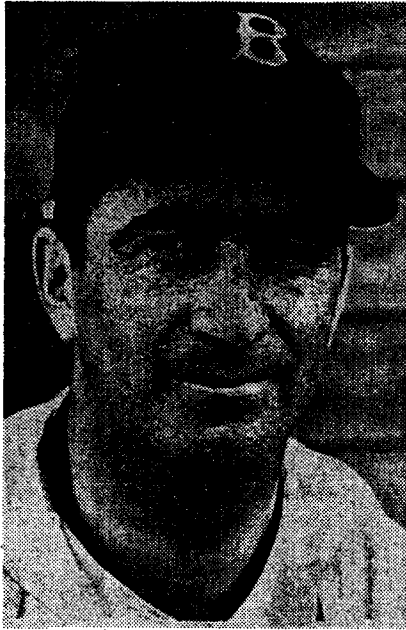
This was true. Berg stuck around for 15

seasons because he was a superior catcher and because he possessed other, less tangible attributes, perhaps chief of which was that he made good copy and thus brought favorable publicity to the various teams for which he played. Born with a photographic memory, Berg was an obsessive autodidact who compulsively filled his bottomless mind with information that, when regurgitated in the company of baseball players and sports-writers, made him seem considerably more erudite than he really was. "Berg was eager to accommodate journalists," Dawidoff writes, "and he cultivated them like so many marigolds." The brightest bloomer of all was John Kieran of the *New York Times*, who wrote column upon column about "his beloved 'Professor,' the bookish ballplayer."

But for all the eclat Berg enjoyed on the sports pages, he was by nature mysterious, a man who lived "a life of abiding strangeness" in a "secret world" that was "charming and seamy, vivid and unsettling, wonderful and sad." By coincidence his career as a ballplayer ended just in time for him to take up the calling for which he had been born. His manifold eccentricities may have seemed wholly out of place on a baseball field, but in the arcane world of espionage they were ideal: "Being a man who found it easy to make other people talk about themselves while keeping himself a secret, a loner with a penchant for disappearing, made Berg the perfect spy."

Like many other eccentrics of similar bent, Berg found himself under the wing of William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the New York lawyer who created the Office of Strategic Services only months before the United States entered World War II. The OSS was "a Soho cocktail party, a bohemian organization filled with dazzling people who were handed assignments and told to make of them what they could." Berg was no scientist, much less nuclear physicist, but his retentive mind and speedy grasp of complex subjects made him a natural member of the small OSS task force assigned to track down the activities of Werner Heisenberg, the eminent theoretical physicist who, though

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Boston Red Sox Moe Berg in 1939

himself no Nazi, was presumed to be the mastermind of Germany's effort to create a workable nuclear bomb.

Berg, whose previous business address had been Fenway Park, now found himself with travel orders, signed by Donovan himself, permitting passage to London, Portugal, Algiers and Italy. His assignment was to find out "which German and Italian scientists were alive, where they were located and what their travel plans were," to "learn what he could about German nuclear weapons" and to produce "a status report on the supply of rare metals in countries throughout Europe." For a time the possibility of kidnapping Heisenberg was seriously considered; in 1944, Berg was told to attend a lecture by Heisenberg in Zurich and, according to a fellow OSS operator, "If anything Heisenberg said convinced him the Germans were close to a bomb, then his job was to shoot him—right there in the auditorium."

It never came to that. Heisenberg's speech was innocuous and no shots were

fired. By war's end the Allies discovered that "Heisenberg's bomb never existed," as a result of which, Dawidoff writes, "a callous man might have dismissed Berg's work as a wild goose chase." Dawidoff believes that Berg knew this and that it helps explain why he refused to accept the Medal of Freedom awarded him after the war. This was a pity, for Berg's performance had in fact been exemplary, both resourceful and courageous, and he deserved his country's gratitude.

It is at this point that Berg's life took a troubling turn. With the dissolution of the OSS and the rise of the CIA, Berg's world of romantic espionage was over. He tried a few assignments for the CIA, but was temperamentally unsuited to its bureaucratic style. "Unleashed from his moorings," Dawidoff writes, "he wandered aimlessly, unburdened by appointment, salary or obligation. This talented man who could have supported himself in so many ways chose instead to become a vagabond, living on wit and charm and the kindness of friends." His immense charm was all that he needed:

"Berg discovered that friends would happily supply him with lodging, meals, clean underwear, suits and even pocket money just because they liked to be around him. For most of his last 25 years, Berg permitted all sorts of people that pleasure and came to believe that he was doing them the favor."

The story of these years occupies the last third of Dawidoff's biography. This may be more than the period deserves, yet in describing it at length Dawidoff underscores the sense of disappointment and waste that Berg simply cannot escape. It may also be true that Dawidoff is correct to argue that Berg's was a life of such originality that it must be judged worthwhile—on Berg's terms if not on ours—but the portrait he paints of a man utterly alone is a sad one indeed.

Dawidoff paints it very well. He has done heroic research, much of it in unlit corners, and he avoids the temptation of rehashing it to excess. For the most part he also eschews the temptations of amateur psychoanalysis; when he does succumb, it is mostly to revealing effect. Moe Berg doubtless will forever remain a mystery, but Dawidoff has brought the mystery to life. ■