

A Former Agent at the Coffee House: *Post 9/28/77* Intrigue Among the Singles Scene

When we heard that a former undercover agent was coming to the Coffee House of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, we were intrigued. The announcement we received was cryptic: The spy, it said, was a member of the Association of Retired (and Resigned) Counter-Intelligence Agents. He would be identified later, it said, and he would talk about current developments in the CIA controversy and about why spies are necessary.

The Coffee House as well sounded interesting. The announcement said that it "serves singles 21 to 35 with useful and stimulating programs every Tuesday night." That was enough for us. And so, on a suitably dark and rainy night,

we set out for 6125 Montrose Rd. in Rockville to investigate.

We soon found ourselves in a room filled with a number of small round tables with chairs and about 150 casually dressed people milling about and munching on cake and drinking punch. We were told that the lecture was to start at 7:30 and that the time from 7:30 to 8:00 was to be a sort of special hour in which people were to get to know each other. Everyone we talked to, however, said that they weren't getting to know each other, they were just waiting for the lecture to start. We were impressed by such single-mindedness of purpose and set off in search of Joel Segaloff, the president of the Coffee House.

Mr. Segaloff, who is an economist with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, told us that the Coffee House had been in existence for the last 10 years and that starting Oct. 7, it would be moving to Adis Israel Synagogue at Connecticut and Porter streets for the winter months.

Soon the room got very quiet as the guest speaker was introduced. His name, we learned, was Lewis Regenstein, and his blue leisure suit was modish and his hair was longish, and, according to the young woman sitting behind us, he was "really cute." He is also 32 and single, which, at least on one level, made him as much a part of the crowd as

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Listening to a Spy

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the audience he was addressing.

Mr. Regenstein, who left the CIA in 1971 to work on behalf of the cause of wildlife preservation, began by plugging his book, "The Politics of Extinction and said that if his audience "really wanted to read about government scandals," they should read his book, "which makes the CIA look pretty tame."

The audience listened quietly as Mr. Regenstein talked about the history of the CIA and of spying in general and about why it was necessary to have such an agency and to preserve its secrecy. His tone was very sincere and earnest and he seasoned his defense of the agency with biblical references and humorous anecdotes. After awhile, he opened the floor to questions.

Mr. Regenstein did not always answer each question directly, but there was, at times, a certain ingenuous charm in the way he did answer them. He responded, for instance, that the reason he did not talk about domestic surveillance was because that was on page seven of his notes and he had run out of time before he got there.

The questions continued even after the program was over, and a number of people went up to talk to the former agent personally. One suspicious young man asked Mr. Regenstein how he was supposed to know

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that Mr. Regenstein was, indeed, a former CIA agent and not someone sent over from Actors' Equity, while an older woman gave him a lecture on the democratic system.

After the discussion, the group went back to milling about and getting to know each other. Mr. Regenstein's presentation got mixed reviews from those who had heard him, some saying that he had been very "insightful" and others saying that they thought he was evasive. Soon, however, the discussions seemed to turn from talk of the CIA to topics better expressed in meaningful glances and we began to notice that three was becoming a crowd and that more often than not, we were the third party.

Nevertheless, we persisted. We were curious about the Coffee House as a meeting place for young singles and we started asking questions. We also started getting answers, but what we didn't get were names. Secrecy, it seems, has its place, after all.

Take for example, the attractive young couple sitting at one of the tables near the middle of the room. They had just met each other for the first time that night and were smiling benevolently on their good fortune when they began to

get suspicious. "You're not going to put our names in the paper are you?" the young man asked. We allowed as how that was the idea. "You have to understand," he said, "in some circle's the idea that you met someone of the opposite sex in a singles' place is sort of frowned upon, and this place is the equivalent for Jews of the singles' bars in Georgetown."

We tried again, and found lots of people who disagreed with that assessment, at least, they said, as far as they were concerned. They only came for the lectures, they said, and then they asked to borrow our pen to write down what looked like a phone number on the nearest available napkin.

We weren't quite sure what all the embarrassment was about, but since we weren't about to add yet another hindrance to the course of that emotion which allegedly never runs smooth, we decided instead to surrender gracefully.

Gail Deutsch of Silver Spring and Jonathan Mayer of Riverdale had, after all given us their names. She had just moved to the area from San Diego and went to the Coffee House to make friends and he went "more than seldom and less than often." They didn't have much more to say about it, except for the fact that they had just met, and, after all, there wasn't much more than that to say. At least to us, we realized, and off we went.

—By Lynn Darling