

Books of The Times

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The Bridge at Gleinicker

By JOHN LEONARD

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ABEL. By Louise Bernikow. Introduction by Burt Silverman. 347 pages. Trident. \$7.95.
OPERATION OVERFLIGHT: The U-2 Pilot Tells His Story for the First Time. By Francis Gary Powers. With Curt Gentry. 375 pages. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$6.95.

There must be a hundred plot-starved novelists who would have sacrificed a thumb to be on the Gleinicker Bridge between Potsdam and West Berlin, Saturday morning, Feb. 10, 1962, when 60-year-old Rudolf Abel and 32-year-old Francis Gary Powers were exchanged. Abel, after a decade as an undercover Soviet agent in the United States, had served almost 5 years of a 30-year sentence for espionage in an Atlanta prison. Powers, after his U-2 spy plane was shot down over Soviet territory by a SAM (surface-to-air missile), had served 21 months of a 10-year sentence for espionage in Vladimir prison near Moscow. We swapped an enigma for an all-American boy.

It's the enigma—whether he called himself Kayotis, Milton, Goldfus, Collins, Mark or Abel—that absorbs Miss Bernikow. As Emil Goldfus, Colonel Abel of the K.G.B. rented studio space “on the wasteland edge of Brooklyn Heights” from 1953 until his arrest. He painted, he dabbled in photography, he made jewelry. He also made close friends with a group of young artists and writers who would subsequently achieve fame—Jules Feiffer, David Levine, Harvey Dinnerstein, Ralph Ginzburg, Danny Schwartz, Sheldon Fink and Burt Silverman.

Microdots and “Drops”

Meanwhile, under the code name “Mark,” he engaged in the sort of mind-boggling huggermugger usually associated with third-rate spy thrillers: slinking about town leaving money and microfilm in various hollow bolts and magnetic containers, at various “drops” (a hole in a wall on Jerome Avenue in the Bronx, a bridge over a Central Park footpath, a lamppost in Fort Tryon Park); signalling or being signaled by other Soviet agents with chalk marks on subway platforms; stapling microdots into the spines of magazines and mailing them to Paris, etc.

Abel was apprehended by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Immigration Service only on the defection of his assistant, Reino Hayhanen, an incompetent spy but a hard man with a vodka bottle. He was defended at his trial by James B. Donovan, who would later arrange the swap on Gleinicker Bridge. Serious constitutional questions—dealing with the (possibly illegal) seizure of evidence—were raised at the trial. Miss Bernikow deals with those questions as skillfully as she tells the whole strange story, which appears to have been played out under a cloud of psychological ambivalence.

Like Burt Silverman and the other Brooklyn Heights artists, Miss Bernikow can't quite square the idea of Goldfus in his studio (a friend) and Abel in the headlines (a right-wing fantasy, to be deplored). Could Goldfus have been, instead of an

elaborate deception, the submerged Abel, the Abel who *might have been* but for historical happenstance? What secrets, after all, did he “drop”? No one knows. And Abel isn't telling; when Miss Bernikow and Mr. Silverman went to Moscow in search of “Emil,” he declined to see them . . . a superb mystery story without a final chapter.

Francis Gary Powers, on the other hand, tells almost everything: from his boyhood to his Air Force training to his recruitment by the Central Intelligence Agency to his abortive mission, trial, imprisonment, release and return to this country to find that he had become, by virtue of much syndicated yawping, an example of the deterioration of our national character. Why didn't he kill himself; wasn't that what we paid him for?

Complacency for Rationale

In fact, it wasn't what we paid him for. Mr. Powers seeks to exonerate himself, and he succeeds. In the process he paints an appalling picture of C.I.A. complacency—the Russians will never shoot you down, therefore you needn't know either our cover story or any Russian; if they do, tell them everything; when they did, it must have been because you flew too low, since their missile guidance systems are inadequate—followed by buck-passing. Mr. Powers had been instructed to tell all, and did not. He had the option of taking with him the poisoned needle in the silver dollar (!), to be self-employed only if he were tortured, which he wasn't. The C.I.A. refused to believe, even after his many hints at his trial, that U-2s could be shot down, until Cubans did it with SAMs several years later.

There is much in “Operation Overflight” about Mr. Powers's domestic troubles, his annoyance with President Kennedy for not bailing him out; his stateside troubles with the C.I.A. and various investigatory committees after the Abel exchange. Unlike Abel, Mr. Powers is not a many-sided man. He never cared at all about politics until he ended up in a Soviet prison. All he wanted to do was be paid well for flying. All that concerns him now is that the C.I.A. prepare more thoroughly for such mishaps as befell him. And yet he seems to exist in another moral dimension altogether from the soldiers at Mvlai; he never killed anybody, and he behaved under pressure about as well as any of us would, with the possible exception of syndicated columnists and those Congressmen who will fight to the last drop of someone else's blood. He was the classic scapegoat.

Oddy, Colonel Abel got 30 years for conspiring to do something nobody seems quite sure what, only it was sneaky; and Mr. Powers got 10 years for violating the air-space and photographing the defense installations of the Soviet Union. But on the evidence of these two books, the C.I.A. and the K.G.B. are equally incompetent. Is that good or bad? I don't know.