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General Editor

Shelby Shapiro

tis@ncis.org

Humanities Editor

Amanda Haste

amanda.haste@ncis.org

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jcunningham@ncis.org

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How Experience Becomes History: The Secrets Revealed, and Created, by a File from the FBI

Boria Sax (New York, USA)

Independent Scholar, NCIS

Correspondence should be addressed to: vogelgreif@aol.com

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Abstract

Traditional history does not simply record events but also, inevitably, edits them, often until they conform to archetypal patterns. The result is a comparatively stately narrative, which is profoundly different from the way in which participants experience events as they unfold. Today, many events enter history even before they are completed, since they are accompanied by a running commentary from pundits and other observers. Nevertheless, the vast number of records that are available today, especially in digital form, often challenges this exalted status, since the visceral immediacy of events in progress, though quickly suppressed, does not so easily fade. In this paper, the author discusses the discovery that his late father worked as a spy at the Manhattan Project, as recorded in a censored FBI file of which only about 12 % of the words in the file have been released. This paper explores the role of this file as a forum in which experience has been altered by a combination of trauma, practical demands, and wishful thinking, to conform to our expectations of history.

Keywords: *espionage; censorship; history*

Personal experience seems holistic, direct and, in consequence, authoritative. As Walt Whitman put this in "Song of Myself," "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there."¹ We may perceive some experiences, such as those recounted by Holocaust survivors or by our ancestors, as almost holy. But accounts of personal experience are also unabashedly subjective. On closer examination, they are likely to be distorted by rationalizations, boasts, resentments, lapses of memory, or even lies.

Traditional academic modes of historical investigation also have obvious, if arguably inevitable, limitations. They depend on the work of innumerable colleagues, who might not all be reliable. The large number of qualifiers and special cases, which are necessary to address potential criticism, can make the conclusions appear trivial. The inability of academic experts to reach, or even approach, consensus on countless historical, philosophical, and artistic questions conveys an impression of futility. The explicit articulation of all stages in a line of argument often leads to tedium. Finally, scholarship is fragmented into countless fields, which may study the same material yet reach differing conclusions. It is small wonder that the word "academic" can be used to mean "inconsequential."

In this essay, I will endeavor to show that redaction of records often transforms experience into history by endowing it with an aura of mystery and significance. Since I will rely largely on personal documents and

¹ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Stanza 33. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45477>.

memories, readers may feel this article is not entirely "academic." To the extent that may be true, I would argue that this is not necessarily a bad thing. For the most part, academic knowledge is cumulative, with every work building on the foundation of those that came before. But the Socratic tradition requires that we constantly reconsider the basis of that foundation, a mandate that takes us back to a condition prior to the formation of philosophy or any other established field. At that outer limit, what we confront is personal experience.

Furthermore, history is not by any means solely, perhaps not even primarily, a province of professional academics. Researching family history, an activity once confined to aristocrats, is popular in the United States and other countries. People with little or no formal schooling as historians often research local history as well. In White Plains, New York where I live, the Jacob Purdy House, now known to have been Washington's Headquarters during part of the American Revolution, was discovered by a plumber. While digging around some pipes, he came across an old cannon ball, which inspired his interest in the city's past.

Most significantly, citizens confront history whenever they follow current events and attempt to place their own experience in a larger perspective. At times, amateurs may have an advantage of distance, which can enable them to see dynamics that are less apparent to those fully immersed in a profession. They may not be so committed to the dominant paradigms of their era, which, in turn, can prove ephemeral. I am an academic who usually publishes on human-animal relations, an area that are far removed from the subject of this essay. That gives a somewhat ambiguous position here between amateur and professional, but I hope to bring some of the advantages of each.

WHAT IS HISTORY?

When experience has been ordered, processed, edited, and cataloged, we call it "history." That bears about the same relation to the chaos of events in progress as a stack of boards and a bag of leaves does to a wind-battered tree in August. Traditional history does not simply record events but also, inevitably, edits them, often until they conform to archetypal patterns. There are countless narratives of great warriors, rebels, humanitarians, and geniuses.

There are glorious victories, tragic defeats, and heroic struggles. While such labels for people and events are not necessarily mistaken, they are one-dimensional.

The result is a comparatively stately narrative, which is profoundly different from the more chaotic way in which participants experience events as they unfold. At times, people have even endeavored to model their lives after historical accounts. At the start of the modern period, figures such as Goethe, Napoleon, and Byron saw themselves as actors on the grand stage of history, giving performances for posterity, complete with settings and costumes.²

The modern, academic study of history dates back only to about the late eighteenth century. The word "history" comes ultimately from the Greek *historia*, via Latin, and originally referred to a narrative sequence, whether fictional or true. Around the end of the seventeenth century, it became separated from "natural history," which pertained to anything outside of human society. Until at least the second half of the nineteenth century, history generally took the form of stories about "great men," recorded, often without much concern about accuracy, largely for moral or practical lessons. This approach is still central to introductory history courses, particularly in primary education, and it pervades popular culture to this day. It was satirized by Ambrose Bierce, who defined "history" as "an account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools."³

As Berger and Niven have pointed out, the professionalization of history as a discipline during the nineteenth century was closely connected with the rise of the modern nation. It was intended to articulate, or possibly to create, a sense of shared experience that would bind citizens together. At the same time, "[...] professional historians of all political and theoretical persuasions tended to perceive memory as the 'other' of history — characterized precisely by its selectivity and subjectivity."⁴

But increasing abuse of nationalism, especially in the two World Wars, made it impossible to take the

² Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*. Trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) 399-549.

³ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000) 110. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/972/972-h/972-h.htm>

⁴ Stefan Berger and Bill Niven, eds., *Writing the History of Memory* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2014) 136.

national ideal for granted, and revealed the intense bias that so often was concealed by a pretense of objectivity. Increasingly, historians focused not on glory but on the construction and invention of collective identity.⁵ There is now even a branch of historiography known as "memory studies," which analyzes communal recollections.⁶

In the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, Karl Marx and his followers partially switched the emphasis from individuals to largely impersonal, economic forces as the drivers of history.⁷ In the twentieth century, Fernand Braudel⁸ and the Annales School broadened the scope of history still more. By emphasizing factors such as climate, geography, and demographics, they not only further reduced the attention to rulers, but also broke down the barrier between history and science.

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, Frances Fukuyama famously proclaimed "the end of history."⁹ He argued that the ideological conflicts of the past few centuries had come to an end, and that liberal democracy would be the way of the future. Few people agreed with him at the time, and subsequent events such as the revival of religious conflicts and the return of autocrats such as Putin show convincingly that Fukuyama was mistaken. But his theory reflected more than just the brief euphoria that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was also a still barely articulate sense that the old model of history as a narrative progression with distinct stages and an implicit goal no longer held much conviction.

A book that provides much of the theoretical impetus for this essay is *We Have Never Been Modern* by Bruno Latour. It seems evasive, and even a bit comic, how thinkers in the past century or so, increasingly designate eras with the prefix "post," such as "post-Christian," "post-Holocaust," "post-industrial," "post-structuralist," "postmodern," "post-humanist," and so on. These labels define a period by what it follows

rather than what it is, so they do not really describe it at all.

According to Latour, this is because the fundamental characteristic of modernism has been a strictly linear conception of time, which is divided up according to revolutionary events and ideas by which everything is irrevocably changed. The breaks with the past are, however, an illusion, since "we have never been modern," and historical changes are neither progressive nor irreversible.¹⁰ This is a view that sets limits to human aspirations to "change the world," yet liberates men and women, in my opinion, from an oppressive sense of finality. Most significantly, this perspective brings history closer to experience, but eliminating much of the inflated significance that traditionally surrounded many "historical" events.

History is not only in the pieces of information that make up a narrative. It is, just as importantly, in the gaps that punctuate this narrative sequence, which are, in many ways, as deliberate as the narrative itself. With respect to recorded history, these are missing pieces of information such as, say, the identity of the famous "man with the iron mask" seen in prisons of seventeenth-century France. The equivalent in an FBI file is a crossed out sentence with the words "top secret" scrawled in the margin. These interruptions provide drama, emphasis, and impetus to further investigation. They can also confer the glamor and mystery by which history so often lives. In this essay, I will use the FBI file about my father, Saville Sax, as an example, perhaps a sort of microcosm to show the way in which history is created.

SECRET AGENCIES AND NORMAL LIFE

Agencies such as the FBI, CIA, KGB, and MI6 can be remarkably like academic societies of anthropologists or historians in the way they attempt to objectively investigate, and often intervene (occasionally with violence but usually with discretion) in human affairs. They study groups of people using a variety of methods from fieldwork to archival research, and apply the results in ways that include practical consulting and the publication of monographs. Their ideological foundations often go very far beyond stated agendas such as promoting democracy,

⁵ Berger and Niven 140.

⁶ Mary Fulbrook, "History-Writing and 'Collective Memory'" in *Writing the History of Memory*, ed. Stefan Berger and Bill Niven (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2014) 67-70.

⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2000/1847).

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996).

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Washington: Free Press, 2006/1992) xi-xii.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 22.

communism, or nationalism. In an extensive study of declassified files, William Maxwell writes that the CIA employed graduates in literature from elite universities to uncover secret meanings in texts using the techniques of Deconstruction, while the FBI, more old-fashioned, employed the analytical tools of the New Criticism.¹¹ Like conventional academics, agents engage in fierce rivalries with one another that are neither a matter of nationalism nor official ideology.

Their agendas at times range very far beyond practical goals such as preventing terrorism. The CIA, for example, decided that abstract art would be a perfect foil to the socialist realism of the Soviet Union, making that country appear crude and reactionary by comparison with the United States. During the 1950s and 60s, it promoted abstraction by channeling funds primarily through a front organization called the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which had offices in 35 countries, published over a score of prominent cultural magazines, organized art exhibitions, held conferences, awarded prizes, and managed to make abstraction the dominant style of American art in the mid-twentieth century.¹² The CIA also provided some of the impetus behind the Creative Writing boom in approximately the same period.¹³ The FBI infiltrated not only political but also literary organizations and had agents review new books. Though usually unfavorable, their critiques drew attention to previously obscure Black writers and, according to Maxwell, ultimately contributed to the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁴ In an analogous way, the FBI, through its heavy use of agent provocateurs, probably also helped fuel the radicalism of the late 1960s. The KGB contributed to the peace movement of the 1950s through the 1970s and the folk music boom in the United States, as well as deliberately creating tensions between American Blacks and Jews.¹⁵

Such agendas were widely rumored, yet seemed paranoid and impossible to verify, during the Cold War, and they are only now gradually emerging, largely from declassified documents. These have only a highly indirect, and often questionable, connection with international politics. The endeavors show a combination of intellectual sophistication, autonomy, and personal idiosyncrasy, which make them vastly more complex than our various stereotyped images of agents as faceless bureaucrats, adventurers, or fanatics.

The files of these agencies — I think here particularly of the FBI — may be among the most historically significant documents that we have. They are full of details that nobody else thought important enough to record, which can tell us about the paraphernalia of everyday life. It is interesting to learn, for example, that when the FBI searched my parents' apartment in 1953, they made a painstaking inventory of every book yet, so far as I can tell, no effort to map or describe the residence. This can now tell me a little about what interested my parents at the time, but even more about the Bureau itself and the era in which it operated. This was a time when high literature seemed to define our culture, to a degree that seems almost unimaginable today. Whether one preferred Dickens or Dostoyevsky was not just a personal matter, since reading preferences were a large part of personal identity. To use the files effectively as historical documents, it will be necessary, in my opinion, to strip away some of the melodrama that surrounds them.

But the FBI files do a lot more than just supplying details in any grand narrative. The most important thing that they can tell us is not about "history," considered as an established category, but about how we construct history. They tell us at least as much about the observers as about the people who are observed, and most fundamentally of all about the relation between the two groups. Their meaning lies not simply in the statements but in the silences between these statements, in the gaps where something has been censored or left out. It is the failure and repression of memory, as much as the recording of it, which creates history, essentially, as a highly redacted version of experience. History is the black line in the manuscript. The way in which events are recorded in an FBI file, which becomes

¹¹ William J. Maxwell, *F. B. Eyes: How Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) 170-201. Use by intelligence agencies constitutes neither a recommendation nor a criticism of these techniques of literary criticism. Obviously, those who developed them could not possibly either control nor anticipate the way they might be used.

¹² Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999) 1-6.

¹³ Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015) 69.

¹⁴ Maxwell 230-349

¹⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) 237-239.

public decades later, can be a model for the transformation of experience into history.

THE FILES

My late father, Saville Sax, came from a family of Russian Jews that immigrated to the United States in 1914 and converted to Communism. He worked as a spy for the Soviet Union, passing secrets that he obtained from a college friend at the Manhattan Project. When I was growing up, the FBI was constantly following my father and mother, tapping their phone, looking through their garbage, and interviewing their acquaintances. For reasons that have not yet been entirely clarified, the FBI opted not to prosecute him, but I believe my parents' reaction to the harassment caused trauma within our family.

As I child, I had no idea that this was going on, but that simply made the ubiquitous paranoia even more difficult to deal with. In 1995, when I was already well into my forties, I learned this from a journalist. I had already had a tempestuous relationship with my late father, and my initial reaction was to feel almost sick. I didn't want to talk or think about it, and even gave away things that reminded me of him. But after a while, the distress gave way to relief, since it explained a lot of things that had previously seemed to be unfathomable mysteries, such as why we moved six times per year and why he talked, in ways that seemed paranoid, about being followed.

All of a sudden, on reading his FBI files, my world had turned upside down. In terms of specific events, I learned that my childhood had been completely different from what I had thought. In terms of less tangible qualities, my intuitions were more than confirmed. There had been an amorphous, barely-articulated terror running through the days of my childhood. I had not known how to talk about it, and it seemed a little self-indulgent or neurotic to even think about it. At times, I would universalize it, thinking it was the "existential condition" that the philosophers had spoken of. Often, I dismissed it as a product of my overly excitable imagination. All of a sudden, I could see that it was not only very palpable, but not so difficult to talk about. The "reality" of my childhood turned into a fantasy, while the fantasy became terrifyingly real. The "history" was an official, "objective" record, while the reality was my memories, blended, as they inevitably are, with fears and fantasies.

At my request, the FBI has by now released to me about 700 out of more than 3,000 pages that it collected on my father's case from the mid-1940s through the late 1960s, and these are often so heavily redacted that only an odd phrase or two is readable. The FBI files provided me with remarkably little substantive information, but their appearance haunted me. The scribbled notes in the margins, the crossings out, the number of officials who initialed them, and the irregular pieces of tape covering forbidden words.... Especially ominously, the FBI said that it would consider the use of what it referred to as "highly controversial investigative techniques." The files are written in bureaucratic prose, but there is nothing slick about them. They have a sort of quirky, arbitrary quality that at least shows the humanity of their creators. They were produced on manual typewriters, in which the spacing and the characters are slightly irregular. Several arrows, lines and occasional notes are written in pen. On the older files, the tape that covers censored passages is very irregular in shape and obviously cut by hand, but in the later ones it is standardized.

I strongly suspect that reasons for the many deletions may be at least as personal as they are political. The passages may have simply reminded a bureaucrat of something that was unpleasant to her. In the margins of the files are codes, supposedly indicating why passages were redacted. The code "b1" indicates it is a matter of national security, while "b2" means a reason that pertains to the internal workings of the FBI. The code "7d" indicates that the passage was blocked out to protect confidential sources, while "7c" indicates that releasing the information would be an unwarranted invasion of someone's privacy. But these categories are often too general to be very helpful without the full context and a great deal of interpretation. Because so many of the labels appear almost arbitrary, I think employees of the FBI at times simply blocked out parts of files because passages made them uncomfortable, and they later provided a rationalization. But, whenever the censors blocked out a passage, they unintentionally surrounded it with an aura of significance.

MISSING CONTEXT

American culture in the fifties and early sixties was pervaded by an idyllic dream of domesticity. My mother cultivated the trappings of what was regarded

as "normal" family life. We had picnics, excursions, and formal dinners out. I joined the Cub Scouts, and my mother became a Den Mother. At times, we may have seemed typical to the point of being dull. But, looking back, I wonder if the paraphernalia of normality could have been, at least in part, a front, to hide my father's spying. And the glamor of historical importance seems a far greater fraud still, and it is almost funny that the fate of empires could be determined by events so ridiculously arbitrary.

When I was a hardly more than a year old, my father drove a taxi and my mother worked as a waitress. On January 1, 1951, he had a burst of temper when he got home from work and she was slow about making breakfast. He wrote about what happened in a journal, which was duly noted by the FBI:

Sue said that she would not talk to me if I yelled. I started to make the meal myself; she walked out and talked very sweetly to Boria. This is always her reaction to an argument.

Withdrawal. And deep brooding resentment that lasts for months. In making the salad, I threw the cut-off pieces to the ground. I threw the empty container of milk on the ground. Sue just kept on talking sweetly to Boria, while dressing him to take him out. (See Figure 1.)

The words bring back all sorts of half-formed impressions, feelings, and faded memories. I now can empathize perhaps almost equally with all three participants in this little domestic drama — myself, my father, and my mother. But it is the unseen participants, the agents, who seem to give it more than a personal importance, like academics who decide what is worthy of study.

The change is admittedly a bit subtle, but singling this ephemeral incident, the file seems to fix it in time, overlay it with ideological associations, and begin to place it in the realm of history. In a way that is disconcerting, at least for me, it begins to lose its reality.

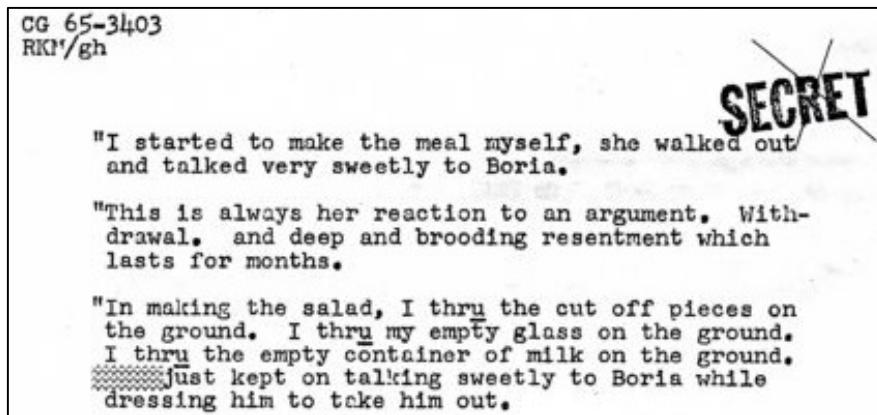


Figure 1 From the FBI File of Saville Sax, dated Jan. 1, 1951

MISSING FEELING

The spy Rudolf Abel is now best known through Steven Spielbergs' 2015 movie "Bridge of Spies," about the lawyer William Donovan negotiating the exchange of Soviet spy Rudolf Abel for American pilot Gary Powers. At any rate, I remember my parents telling me about Abel as a child. They described him as a charming, convivial fellow who entertained his friends by playing the guitar. I was a bit startled when I saw pictures of him much later, to see that he looked

very gaunt, dour, and not at all well. He was a chain-smoker, and, by the time he was arrested, the lung cancer that would eventually kill him may have already begun.

He had an art studio in New York under the name of Emil Goldfus, one of several aliases that he used in his career. He used to come up occasionally in the conversation of my parents and their friends, and was even mentioned briefly in the newspapers once or twice. He stood out as a realist painter, at time when

the art world was dominated by abstract expressionism. That might have marked him as a "reactionary," at least in art circles, except that people allowed him, as a foreigner, a certain leeway. He seemed a bit exotic. He probably regarded realism as way of resisting the decadent elites. Despite, or because of, the prestige that abstraction had in intellectual circles, there were plenty of jokes going around about how it was effete and pretentious.

It is just possible that my parents may have seen a personal side that Abel did not reveal to just anybody. My father seems to have had some sort of contact with Abel, though their relationship remains obscure. The FBI file pictured here — dated Feb. 13, 1957 — alludes to it, though it is too heavily censored to be very revealing (See Figure 2.) Whatever was in the uncensored file moved the FBI to reopen its investigation of my father. One thing that really stands out here is the use of the word "poignant," since the 1,000 or more pages of files have no other references to any emotions. They simply record facts and protocols, but in a tone of complete detachment. What could be "the most poignant fact noted as a result of this review [...]?" If even the investigators dropped their "academic" style and showed at least a trace of emotion, it must have been something important. I wish that I knew what.

This taboo against emotive phrases is a practice that the FBI must have taken from academia. One result of it is to make any violation, even a mild transgression like the present one, stand out dramatically. But, as in much scholarship, the academic tone is not simply a tool to assure objectivity, but a rhetorical device that, much of the time, confers a misleading sense of significance.

MISSING IDENTITY

"Confidential informant of known reliability." Those words come up constantly in my father's FBI file, usually next to a name that has been blocked out. These are secret, inscrutable presences, which at times seem like spirits of folklore. Just before my parents broke up after 18 years of marriage, my father had an affair with a woman. Her unusual poise, deftness, and eventual abrupt disappearance from his life make me think that she might have been an agent of the FBI or some other organization devoted to covert action, but I have no way of confirming whether or not that is true. At any rate, the sheer number of such presences in the past seems to change its very nature, endowing all sorts of encounters with an aura of mystery and possible significance. They seem not to be simple experiences but clusters of riddles, as is the following excerpt from a file:

SPECIAL FORM NO. 64
MAY 1962 EDITION
GSA FPMR (41 CFR) 101-11.6

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

~~SECRET~~
TOP SECRET

TO: DIRECTOR, FBI (65-67563) DATE: FEB 13 1967

FROM: SAC, NEW YORK (65-22051) ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED EXCEPT
WHERE SHOWN OTHERWISE.

SUBJECT: [REDACTED] (S) 7-30-01
CLASSIFIED BY NLS/EP-60267-AG
DECLASSIFY ON [REDACTED]

ReNYlet, 10/7/64.

Referenced letter set forth an analysis of this case based on information in the [REDACTED] investigation, information from [REDACTED] and information obtained from RUDOLF ABEL, correspondence while he was incarcerated in the US.

The most poignant fact noted as a result of this review with respect to [REDACTED] was so in the [REDACTED] case wherein [REDACTED] This [REDACTED] This was noted to be also true with regard to the RUDOLF ABEL correspondence wherein he asked his wife concerning the welfare of [REDACTED] which according to [REDACTED] were undoubtedly identical with [REDACTED] (S)

More recently, [REDACTED] has furnished information to the effect that IGOR ANDREEV, Counselor, SMUN. (KGB), New York Residency, had the assignment of [REDACTED] (S)

Towards this end, ANDREEV was to attempt [REDACTED] (S)

① Bureau (65-67563) (RM)
③ Chicago (65-4845) (RM)
(1-65-3403) (THEODORE A. HALL, SAVILLE SAX aka)
1-New York (65-15299)
1-New York (65-22039)
1-New York

100-421961- FEB. 14 1967
NOT RECORDED
21 AUG 2 1967

JB:jv
(8)

SOVIET SECTION

ORIGINAL FILED IN 65-67563-15

Chicago 2/27/67
1-NY
JPL: dal

Buy U.S. Savings Bonds Regularly on the Payroll Savings Plan

Figure 2 from the FBI file of Saville Sax, Feb. 13, 1967

Cgo. File No. 65-3403
RKM:DJS

~~TOP SECRET~~

S. SAX

Mrs. BLUMA SAX, RFD No. 1, Wallkill, New York, which letters were post-
marked July 19 and 25, 1950. BLUMA SAX is the mother of SAVILLE SAX.

On July 17, 1950, Confidential Informant [redacted] furnished an empty envelope
addressed to Mr. [redacted] S. SAX, 6516 South Minerva Avenue, which bore
the return address of [redacted]

b2
b7C
b7D

b7C

THEODORE ALVIN HALL AND SAVILLE SAX

Inasmuch as the following information concerns both HALL and SAX, it is
being set forth under a separate section.

b2
b7D

There follows a summary of information furnished by Confidential Informant
of known reliability, concerning [redacted]

[redacted]

~~(S) TOP SECRET~~

[redacted] Informant advised that it was indicated that [redacted]

[redacted]

~~(S) TOP SECRET~~

[redacted]

~~(S) TOP SECRET~~

[redacted] Information from informant reflects [redacted]

[redacted]

~~(S) TOP SECRET~~

[redacted]

~~(S) TOP SECRET~~

b1

~~TOP SECRET~~

Figure 3. From the FBI File of Saville Sax, Aug. 1950

MISSING SIGNIFICANCE

What on earth could possibly be a matter of state security after well over half a century had passed, and just about all the people involved are long dead? Censuring files to protect the identity of an informant, ostensibly for the sake of his/her relatives, impresses me as mistaken but at least understandable. But there are a few long passages in the file marked "b1," which indicates that information was withheld in the late 1990s for reasons of national security, as in the file above. I tried to appeal the redactions, but my attempt was rejected, admittedly on reasonably good legal grounds, since I got it in long after the deadline. Whatever the designation means, the letters indicate that somebody found the contents very dramatic, perhaps even traumatic.

CONCLUSION

Latour describes the modern perspective on the past as "Maniacal destruction [...] balanced by an equally maniacal conservation." In other words, [...] moderns insist on the complete and irrevocable destruction of the past through progress, but then historians reconstruct the past, detail by detail, all the more carefully inasmuch as it has been swallowed up forever.¹⁶ Latour meant this primarily in regard to the academic enterprise, which has often tended to emphasize facts but ignore context, thus making a continuous experience into a fragmented history. But Latour's comment seems to apply at least as well to documents like files of the FBI. They preserve prodigious amounts of information, yet always take it out of context, while breaking it into disconnected fragments, which arouse curiosity and provide impetus to more investigation.

Perhaps governments keep old secrets largely because these convey an aura of glamour and mystery, without which many affairs of state might be revealed in their human dimension, somewhere between banality and tragedy. We keep many secrets, in other words, just to have secrets.¹⁷ They turn ordinary bureaucrats into James Bond, bumbling into evil geniuses or martyrs, and nervousness into paralyzing fear. But today – as we confront grave

environmental, intellectual and political crises – clarity of thought is not just a luxury. We need to lay aside false glamour, and view the past in ways that do not make us less or more than human beings, except possibly in fun.

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¹⁶ Latour 82

¹⁷ Daniel Patrick Moyhahan, *Secrecy: The American Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 178-201.