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A Prowl Through the Spy Museum

By GEORGE MELLOAN
December 12, 2006

Washington

"Do you think you could be a spy?"

This provocative question is addressed to visitors to the International Spy Museum here. After I had browsed through all the deadly paraphernalia on display -- including the type of umbrella that a KGB assassin used to fire a fatal poison pellet into the right thigh of Bulgarian anticommunist Georgi Markov in London in 1978 -- I decided, no, I don't think so. The horrible radiation-poisoning death of ex-KGB spy Alexander Litvinenko in London in late November, most likely inflicted by his former Moscow playmates, didn't change my mind.



School for Spies exhibit at the Washington museum

But exploring the shadow world in perfect safety was well within my risk parameters, so last month I became one of the many thousands of visitors who've prowled through the Spy Museum since it opened in July 2002. I've had a lifelong fascination with spy stories. The early works of John Le Carré were among my favorite books, despite the anti-Americanism that occasionally peeked through. James Bond's exploits would be fun even without the babes. How many spy movies have I seen? I can't even guess.

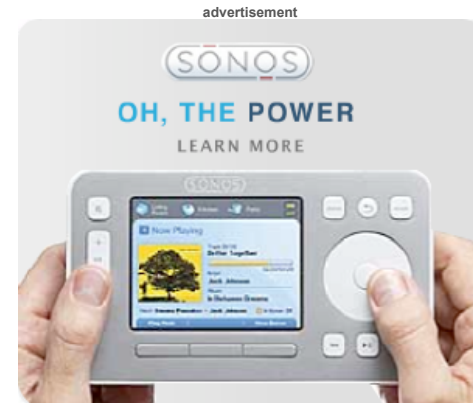
Perhaps that's because of the resemblance between my trade, journalism, and that practiced by spies. Indeed, I have been suspected of spying. The old Soviet Union assumed that all foreign correspondents (I once operated out of The Wall Street Journal's London bureau) were spies. All of theirs were.

After I had applied for a journalist visa to the Soviet Union in 1967, I noticed a man pointing a camera in my direction as I was walking to the South Kensington Underground station. Since there were no interesting photo ops in the backdrop, I assumed he was photographing me. The KGB types who so obviously kept me under surveillance during my visit to the workers' paradise probably had requested a likeness.

Back in London from the U.S.S.R., I got a call from Vladimir Sukach, who identified himself as a fellow financial journalist with the Soviet Economic Gazette. Could we have lunch? I said sure. "I know a nice place on Baker Street called the Hook, Line and Sinkers," he said. How appropriate.



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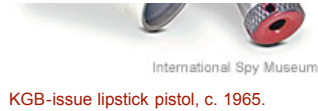
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Vladimir turned out to be a charming fellow who spoke Oxford English. He had a pretty wife, a new Rover and a better apartment than I could afford. He lived outside the Soviet Embassy compound, a sign of rank, but I encountered at one of his parties two blue-serge heavies who identified themselves as part of a "trade mission." He was not entirely free of Politburo observation.



KGB-issue lipstick pistol, c. 1965.

From the questions he asked, I learned what the KGB wanted to know. What Vladimir learned from me that he couldn't have read in the papers, I have no idea. Fourteen years later in Moscow, I asked the editor of the Economic Gazette if he had known Vladimir Sukach. He gave me a blank look.

So it was with special interest that I roamed through the Spy Museum's Cold War artifacts. If Vladimir had wanted his own photo of my face, he could have taken it with a Soviet-designed miniature camera that looked like a coat button. Pistols disguised as lipsticks, cigarette lighters and gloves are on display. The fine art of picking locks is described.

Proving that fact and fiction are interchangeable in the spy world, James Bond's weaponized Aston-Martin DB5 from the 1964 movie "Goldfinger" is on view. And you can see a special projector used to reduce a photograph or secret message to a barely detectable microdot. Discovering a microdot with an assassination warning was central to a thrilling movie I watched just the other night, "Arabesque" with Gregory Peck and Sophia Loren.

DETAILS

INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM
800 F Street, N.W., Washington
Advance tickets recommended
www.spymuseum.org

Sophia was a beautiful spy, but some beauties have been real spies. A Radcliffe girl, Virginia Hall, won the Distinguished Service Cross for her World War II work building a sabotage network in German-occupied France one display notes. From my own spy-story readings, I recalled that a striking, red-haired 1929 Washington debutante, Amy Thorpe, later had a role in the acquisition by British intelligence of a copy of the German enciphering machine, Enigma, which allowed the World

War II allies to read Hitler's coded orders to his generals. By one estimate, this coup shortened the war in Europe by two years. An Enigma machine is on display at the museum.

Clearly, real spies play for big stakes, which is one reason they figure so heavily in popular fiction. The Spy Museum lets visitors know that they are in a city with the most spies of any place on earth, which is certainly plausible if not provable.

One wonders how much real snooping these operatives have to do, since today's official Washington has little ability or inclination to keep secrets. Leaks to the press are a tool of Washington politics. It seems to matter little that some leaks -- like the disclosure in the New York Times last year that the National Security Agency was intercepting the communications of American residents with known links to terrorist organizations -- are useful to the enemy. America's own vast spying apparatus seems to concern itself more with domestic politics than with finding out what potential enemies, such as Iran, are up to.

As any number of ex-spooks have written, a lot of intelligence gathering is the dull, painstaking work of putting pieces of information together to form hypotheses about nefarious enemy goals. But the Spy Museum specializes in the exciting stuff, with lots of interactive displays to test spying skills. My wife, Jody, was better than I at detecting suspicious behavior. School kids lap up this sort of thing, which is why the museum is on the agenda of a lot of student tours. I encountered teenager Brooke Gunter, from Wyomissing, Pa., listening on headphones to a classmate who was being bugged elsewhere in the museum. "Great!" she chortled. Crawling through an air conditioning duct to spy on those below was another favorite of the Pennsylvania youths.

The International Spy Museum, unlike most Washington museums, is a private venture, the brainchild of Milton Maltz, the owner of a Cleveland-based broadcasting company. Its executive director, Peter Earnest, served 36 years with the CIA, including 20 years in the clandestine service. Museum advisers include two former CIA directors, R. James Woolsey and William Webster, and a former KGB chief of counterintelligence, Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin. The image of these veterans of deadly CIA and KGB mischief sharing drinks and jointly plotting ways to entertain schoolchildren is heartwarming. But the image of the stricken Litvinenko intrudes. The war in the shadows continues just as it has for centuries, as we are firmly reminded while poring over what the Spy Museum has to show us.

Mr. Melloan is a former Journal op-ed columnist.

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