

THE RUISLIP SPIES

by Heather Trease

The year 2011 marks the 50th anniversary of the Portland Spies trial.

Helen & Peter Kroger moved into 45 Cranley Drive, Ruislip in 1955. He had an antiquarian book business – an ideal front for sending books with microdots inserted into full stops. She was described as a housewife, very friendly and outgoing, vivacious, often wearing large flowered tops when seen in her front garden chatting to people as they went to and from their employment. It is believed that she gave parties for local children in her garden.

In August 1960 a surveillance operation was opened on Gordon Lonsdale, who was collecting information from Ethel Gee and Harry Houghton on the Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment at Portland in Dorset. Lonsdale, who posed as a Canadian jukebox salesman often visited Ruislip. Sometimes he parked his Studebaker in Willow Gardens, walking through the adjacent alleyway to Cranley Drive, and on other occasions was seen in the vicinity of Ruislip Manor Station. Lonsdale usually visited the Krogers at weekends after he had met with Gee and Houghton.

In November 1960, 45 Cranley Drive was put under surveillance from a house in Courtfield Gardens that overlooked the Kroger's bungalow. The disastrous effect on Mrs Search who lived there and regarded Mrs Kroger as a close friend has been dramatised in both a play and in films.

On Saturday the 7 January 1961, Lonsdale, Houghton and Gee were arrested in Central London at about 4.30pm and the Special Forces gained admittance to the Kroger's bungalow just after 6.30pm. There was a larger than usual police presence in the area and one resident at the Ruislip Manor end of Shenley Avenue enquired what it was all about. She was told, "Just routine".

When arrested Mrs Kroger asked if she could stoke the boiler and was prevented from throwing her handbag in. It contained a six page letter in Russian, a single piece of paper which was a message in code or cipher, another paper sheet containing the names of eight streets (believed to be meeting places) and a piece of glass with three microdots.

Examination of the premises began about 7pm that evening. There was a Yale and a Chubb mortice lock and two bolts and a chain on the front door. The back door had two mortice locks and two bolts, the french doors to the garden were secured by four bolts and every window downstairs had a patent lock. The bathroom could be easily converted into a darkroom and the bungalow was full of high tech equipment including a micro dot reader. Large amounts of money were found: US\$2,563 and \$230 travellers cheques were found under the insulation in the loft, US\$6,000 was found elsewhere in US\$20 notes, and a handbag behind the bookcase contained £200 and two New Zealand passports.

Under linoleum in the kitchen a trapdoor was found which led down to an area 45 ins. x 48 ins. Removal of the rubble there revealed a concrete cover 4 inches thick. Under this was found a bag containing a sophisticated radio transmitter, whose lid contained two identical control setting charts. Another bag contained spare transmitter parts and there was also a magnetic tape device capable of high speed transmission. Communication with Moscow therefore would have been very quick and involved very little interference to electrical devices in the immediate area. At a time when cars could cause interference lines on televisions, it would have passed unnoticed.

All five were committed for trial on Monday the 9 January 1961 which commenced on the 13 March and as we all know, were found guilty. In sentencing the Krogers on the 22 March, Lord Parker, the Lord Chief Justice said he took the view they were both in it “. . . up to the hilt. You are both professional spies. The only distinction I can see between you and Lonsdale is that, if I am right, yours was not the directing mind or minds and you are older than he is.”

The Krogers were revealed as Americans called Cohen, who had been involved in the sale of nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union in the 1940s. They were sentenced to 20 years, but only served eight when they were exchanged for the British lecturer, Gerald Brooke. They both died in the early 1990s.

Lonsdale, a Russian - real name Konon Molody - was sentenced to 25 years, but exchanged in 1964 for the British businessman, Greville Wynne.

Sources:

Newspaper reports of the trial

Reminiscences of a local resident