



Justus Weiner

Jewish Sports Heroes:
The Catcher was a Spy and “Mo” Berg was his Name

6-foot-1, 185-pound Berg:
Known for love of baseball and career as an intelligence officer.

His linguistic skills inspired this observation by Senators teammate Dave Harris: "He can speak seven languages, but he can't hit in any of them."¹

Introduction

There have been 142 Jewish Major League players, including the Giants' 1926 second baseman Andy Cohen; Hall-of-Famer Hank Greenberg; the eminent Sandy Koufax; and the 1928 short stop turned catcher Moe Berg. A professional baseball player and an Office of the Secret Service spy, Moe Berg was raised a non-observant Jew, but was always proud of his heritage. He was born in Manhattan on March 2, 1902, to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents -- Bernard, a druggist, and Rose. The family moved across the Hudson River to Newark, N.J., in 1906, and this is where Moe grew up. Despite his religious non-observance and disinterest there is no doubt that being Jewish contributed to Berg's character. He never denied or tried to hide that he was a Jew, but his desire was to blend in and be respected by the mainstream. His Jewish background did at times isolate him, especially during his career at Princeton. At Princeton University Berg majored in modern languages, while also playing on a championship baseball team. Berg could speak French, Spanish, and Portuguese well, his Japanese was fair, he read books in German, Italian, Greek, Sanskrit, and Latin and spoke small amounts of Hebrew and Yiddish as well.

Enigmatic, eccentric, and elusive, Berg was revered for his genius, ability to speak almost a dozen languages, baseball career, and successful service as a spy during WWII. While the stories of his life have become legend, it is clear that Moe Berg was and remains a mysterious man. He played with the greatest baseball stars in history, including Babe Ruth and Ted Williams, and then proceeded to provide vital information to the U.S government, aiding the U.S to defeat Hitler and establish herself in Europe. Others contend that he was a fraud: "a self-invented mystery, a charming chap, but an outright fraud," (Dawidoff, 8). The stories about his life are combinations of myths and facts: exaggerations of those details that were known in order to obscure the many unanswered questions. After his death in 1972 his ashes were scattered in the Botanic Gardens at Hebrew University on Har Hatzofim. Whatever the truth about his character and life's work, Moe Berg is a curious personality and a great story!

¹ Nicke Acocelle, *Moe Berg: Catcher and spy*, ESPN.COM, http://espn.go.com/classic/biography/s/Berg_Moe.html (visited, July 7, 2004).

season, was doing playing with the likes of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. Said that he had been brought there to give baseball seminars at Japanese Universities to teach the catchers.

- In 1934, while touring with an American all-star team, Berg visited Tokyo. Requested a room in the hotel that gave him a panoramic view of the city.
In the morning, dressed in a kimono, Berg stepped onto the wide balcony of his room and took motion pictures and stills of Tokyo, especially the military installations surrounding the Bay, the harbor facilities, the warships sailing about and at anchor. He moved about the city like some gawking tourist but he managed to get to the top of one of the highest points in Tokyo, the hospital. From there he took motion pictures of Tokyo's coast, including its production plants, particularly those that were already manufacturing weapons and ammunitions for its impending war with China.³
- This photographic record of the Japanese capital proved to be the most current available eight years later when, after Pearl Harbor, Lt.-Col. (later General) James H. Doolittle was planning his dramatic 1942 air strike against Tokyo, the first significant American counterattack of the war. Doolittle spent hours studying Berg's photos and films and his accurate attack against Japanese military installations was based upon the information supplied by the baseball player.⁴
- Others contend that these films were probably of little assistance to the government, and Berg took these photos as a citizen, not a spy.⁵ The films were brief and done by an amateur and probably not especially helpful to the military.
- 1939 was the guest participant on a radio quiz show game called "Information, Please!". Answered all but one question (about Tweedledee and Tweedledum in *Through the Looking Glass* by James Carroll) correctly and impressed both the hosts and the audience. NBC received 24,000 letters requesting that Berg come back on the show and so he appeared twice more on "Information, Please!". His third time on the show went poorly, as he was thrown off guard by questions that requested the participant give the date of his wedding anniversary and his wife's birthday (Berg was never married). Furthermore, Berg had stipulated that no law questions be asked and refused to answer a question about the difference between the words "immaterial" and "irrelevant".

³ Angelfire.com, *Morris "Mo" Berg*, <http://www.angelfire.com/dc/1spy/BergM.html> (visited July 7, 2004).

⁴ Angelfire.com, *Morris "Mo" Berg*, <http://www.angelfire.com/dc/1spy/BergM.html> (visited July 7, 2004).

⁵ Rob Homa, *The Catcher was a Spy*, THE DICKI THON FAN CLUB LITERARY REVIEW, http://www.dickiethon.com/~bookreviews/baseball/dawidoff_berg_spy.htm (visited July 7, 2004).

- Dawidoff p.100 – good description of Berg’s character and different priorities.
 - “Berg was not living a conventional life. His priorities were different from most people’s. He was making use of baseball to plot a life of wandering curiosity. Nothing made him as happy or as comfortable as the routine of a ball-player. ‘Isn’t this wonderful,’ he said once. ‘Work three hours a day, travel around the country, live in the best hotels, meet the best people, and get paid for it.’...Many men could have been lawyers. It took an unusual person to resist convention, live by his wits, and form himself into the character that Moe Berg was becoming.”

- Jewish Community’s perception of Moe Berg-
 - “‘Hank Greenberg, by being a star, was the shining knight,’ says Don Shapiro, who grew up in Detroit. ‘Moe Berg, by being an intellectual, confirmed our ideals. He was a legend in the sense that we all knew about him, knew how smart he was. He was important to Jews because he confirmed that you could be an intellectual and an athlete and an American, too. He was to wider society first a ballplayer and a towering intellect. He was Einstein in knickers.’” (Dawidoff, 117)

- When he called it quits and retired from Baseball in 1940 at the age of 37, he had just 441 hits in 1,812 at-bats, with only six home runs and 206 runs batted in. Continued as a coach for two more years and finally left baseball entirely in 1942. His is said to be the only baseball card on display at the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency.

- Berg was a hit with people and had a reputation for charm and erudition that brought him introductions to powerful people, such as the Rockefeller family, who ordinarily did not associate with ballplayers. In 1941 Berg went to work for Nelson Rockefeller's Inter-American Affairs organization, an agency set up to counter (German, Italian, and Japanese) propaganda in Latin America.
 - Spent a great deal of time in Latin America on fact-finding missions. Natural ability in languages helped him to meet government officials, journalists, and businessmen- collected much useful information from these meetings.

- 1940 –Moe realizes the dire situation in Europe and expresses interest in contributing more to his country. “Europe is in flames, withering in a fire set by Hitler. All over that continent men and women and children are dying. Soon we too will be involved. And what am I doing? I’m sitting in the bull pen, telling jokes to the relief pitchers.”
(Dawidoff, 128)

- Moe fell in love once, with a woman named Estella Huni, a Christian, who was the only woman he was seen with more than once. Met in the mid 1930s in New York and continued to keep in touch while he played for the Red Sox and through the 1940s. Began living together in 1940, but they were not married, which was

frowned upon by society. She, like Berg, was intelligent, spoke Italian, German, and French, energetic, spontaneous, and interested in almost everything! In 1944 he left for the war in Europe and their correspondence eventually became sparse. Soon Estella realized that Berg was distancing himself from her and she married an engineer who she had met in New York. Not known if or how often they spoke when he returned from Europe, but she was the closest anyone ever came to knowing Moe Berg.

- “‘In many ways,’ says Christine Curtis, Estella’s daughter, ‘my mother was as elusive as Mr. Berg.’” (Dawidoff, 146)
- 1943 was recruited into the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) as a civilian employee.
 - **History of the OSS**⁶- Prior to World War II, America had no overall intelligence system beyond that operated by the armed forces. To coordinate secret information of all types at the start of U.S. involvement in World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), on January 13, 1942, created the Central Office of Information and placed General William "Wild Bill" Donovan at its head. Donovan, a World War I hero, quickly organized a vast network of experts in all intelligence fields. The organization's title was changed a short time later to the Office of Strategic Services- OSS. The agency was responsible for espionage and sabotage in countries occupied by the Germans, Italians, and Japanese. It became legendary through the feats of its agents.

Donovan was a tolerant spymaster, allowing his agents a great deal of freedom in accomplishing their missions. He encouraged inventiveness, even recklessness. More than 13,000 men and women worked for the OSS during World War II. They parachuted or were smuggled into all the countries occupied by the enemy to work closely with underground units, the SOE, and the SIS, as well as other national intelligence agencies operated by Allied countries.

One of the most effective operations conducted by the OSS was its preparations for the Allied landings in North Africa in 1942. OSS agents deftly negotiated terms with Vichy French officials to make sure that no French warships in African ports would be given over to the Germans who then occupied most of France. Moreover, they were able to place scores of agents in North Africa, ostensibly as monitors of foodstuffs going to refugees. These agents spent most of their time recording the

⁶ Angelfire.com The History of Espionage, *OSS- Office of Strategic Services U.S. Intelligence Service in World War II (1942 - 1945)*, <http://www.angelfire.com/dc/1spy/OSS.html#BergM> (visited July 7, 2004).

movements of German warships and aircraft through the Mediterranean, while placating indecisive French officials and military commanders in preparation for the Allied landings.

When American and British troops did storm the beaches, OSS agents were waiting for them to lead them through minefields and direct them to the strategic objectives, OSS agents performed the same kind of incredible feats in preparation of the 1944 Normandy landings.

At the end of World War II in 1945, President Harry Truman disbanded the OSS, believing that America had no more need of a super intelligence agency. This attitude quickly changed, however, when the Soviet Union was perceived to be a very real threat to the security of the U.S. and the world, causing the creation of another intelligence agency in 1946, the CIA.

Berg's Career with the OSS

- Berg, according to one biography, was prone to blunders: getting caught trying to infiltrate an aircraft factory during his training, dropping his gun into a fellow passenger's lap, and being recognized by wearing his O.S.S.-issue watch⁷.
- 1943- First assignment was a secret mission to Yugoslavia to assess the strength of the two rival leaders there, Draza Mihajlovic and Joseph Broz Tito. Berg parachuted into Yugoslavia where he met with partisans. Returned to report that Tito's forces were the most effective partisans then fighting the Nazis. He urged that the Allies fully support Tito. After Winston Churchill read Berg's report, he endorsed the plan and weapons and support units were soon sent to Tito.
- 1944- Entered German-occupied Norway as part of an Allied effort to find and destroy a heavy-water plant. Met with underground freedom fighters, and located a secret heavy water plant operated by the Nazis who were attempting to build a nuclear weapon. Bluffed his way past Russian guards in Czechoslovakia by holding up a letter with a large red star on it--this "document" was actually a piece of oil company stationary. Berg's information allowed British bombers to destroy the plant.
- Traveled to Switzerland and found out from a visiting German scientist how far the enemy had progressed in high-speed aeronautics and bacteriological warfare, and also the location of the German scientists. This information came in handy

⁷ Nicke Acocelle, *Moe Berg: Catcher and spy*, ESPN.COM, http://espn.go.com/classic/biography/s/Berg_Moe.html (visited, July 7, 2004).

after the fall of Germany; Allied forces found the scientists and took them to England before Soviet forces could find them

- General William Donovan, the head of the OSS, placed Berg on the AZUSA project. This project looked at the enemy's progress in developing nuclear weapons. Interviewed scientists in Rome for two days to see how far the Italians had progressed in their research, after the city was liberated by US troops. Located several atomic scientists in Italy and later in Germany, the very scientists who later helped America develop its space and atomic programs following World War II. (Berg's exploits were later chronicled in the stirring Fritz Lang film, *Cloak and Dagger*.)
 - It was a foot race between the U.S. and Russia as to which country could bring the scientists into their camps. Berg essentially won the race. On his information, most of the top European scientists were "liberated" by Operation Paperclip, special service commandos, and brought to the West.
 - Chosen to carry out one of the O.S.S.' more ambitious endeavors - a plot to possibly assassinate Werner Heisenberg, the head of Nazi Germany's atom-bomb project. Berg, who spoke German fluently, was sent in December 1944 to Zurich to attend a lecture by Heisenberg.
 - One account - in the book *Heisenberg's War* by Thomas Powers - places Berg in Switzerland during at a lecture by Werner Heisenberg with instructions to kill him if it became apparent that the Germans were making serious progress on the bomb⁸. After the lecture, he is supposed to have walked for a time around the city with Heisenberg and a loaded gun, debating with himself. Berg's assessment of the situation was that Germany was not close to having a nuclear bomb, and there was never an attempt to kill Heisenberg.
- Stayed with the OSS until it was dissolved in 1945. Served as a scientific advisor on the staff of NATO's (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) Advisory Group for Aeronautical Research and Development.
- Following the war the spectacular Berg was awarded the American Medal of Merit, the highest decoration given to a civilian during wartime. For reasons he never explained, Berg refused to accept this most prestigious award.

⁸ The Free Dictionary.com, *Morris "Moe" Berg*, <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Moe%20Berg> (visited July 7, 2004).

- Reported that he continued to undertake U.S. espionage missions in Soviet block nations well into the 1960's.

Post OSS Career

- After being forced out of the spy business in the late forties, Berg didn't hold a regular job for his last twenty-five years. A bachelor, he often freeloaded off friends and relatives, especially his brother Sam, who once sent Moe two eviction notices to get him out of his house. Moe had bad financial problems, but refused to handle them responsibly or find steady work as either a baseball coach or a lawyer. After living with Sam for 17 years, he moved in with his sister Ethel for the final eight years of his life.⁹
- Constantly tried to get work with the CIA, but they repeatedly declined his offers.
 - 1951- Begged CIA to send him to Israel- wrote, "a Jew must do this".
 - 1952- Was accepted by the CIA to do some work in Europe and find out about Russian progress on the atomic bomb. Went to Germany, Rome, and London, but returned unwilling to share information.
 - Personality clashed with the CIA- he could not play by their rules. Was too independent, did not work as part of a team, did not share information well, did not return with concrete tangible reports or information. Was not introspective and refused to assess his shortcomings, did not handle failure well.
- Berg died at 70 on May 29, 1972 in Belleville, N.J., of an abdominal aortic aneurysm. His last words were directed at a nurse, who he asked, "How are the Mets doing today?" and died before she could respond.
- In 1974 Ethel dug up his ashes and took them with her to Israel. Wanted to have a burial for him in Israel, but because he had been cremated it was against Jewish law. A Rabbi told her to take his ashes to Mount Scopus, which overlooks Jerusalem, but to this day, no one knows for sure where his remains are buried.¹⁰

⁹ Nicke Acocelle, *Moe Berg: Catcher and spy*, ESPN.COM, http://espn.go.com/classic/biography/s/Berg_Moe.html (visited July 7, 2004).

¹⁰ Nicke Acocelle, *Moe Berg: Catcher and spy*, ESPN.COM, http://espn.go.com/classic/biography/s/Berg_Moe.html (visited, July 7, 2004).

Moe Berg: The Song¹¹

Moe Berg the catcher - good field and no hit
Somehow he lasted 19 years - 'till his knees made him quit
He never really played much & he never really cared
He was happy just to hang around with a uniform to wear

Moe Berg the Princeton graduate - went on to study law
Got his degree from Columbia - all the while playing ball
He caught the eye of the Dodgers - who were trying to sign a Jew
Who might help 'em sell some tickets - in The Bronx & Yonkers too

Moe Berg the professor of the bullpen joked with pitchers
Reading them the newspapers he used to have delivered
He spoke to 'em in Russian, Japanese & French
He was the greatest scholar that ever rode the bench

Moe Berg & The Babe, they went over to Japan
With a team of touring all-stars giving clinics for the fans
This was back in the 30's as the world prepared for war
Moe took a lot of pictures - nobody knew what for

Moe Berg the secret agent - never even told his mom
Of his mission to determine if the Germans had the bomb
He learned to speak good physics - without hardly a lisp
He infiltrated lectures with the German scientists

Moe Berg the walking riddle - would put his fingers to his lips
If you recognized him on the street - he'd nod & whisper "shhhh"
He kept a lot of secrets - no one will ever know
He knew a lot of people - but nobody ever knew Moe

Moe Berg the beloved - he had the gift of gab
The moocher, the celebrity - he never paid the tab
He could get in at the ballpark - with his lifetime player's pass
He could eat up in the press box - someone always filled his glass

Moe Berg son of an immigrant - brought his father shame
All that education - then to play a child's game
Moe made it to the Majors - but his dad would never go see him
Moe's baseball card is on display at the CIA museum.

Long after he'd retired - there was still Moe Berg the myth
He rode into the sunset sadly hanging onto it
Appearing on a game show - as the mystery guest
Some say disappearing - might be what Moe did best

¹¹ Chuck Brodsky.com, Lyrics by Chuck Brodsky, <http://www.chuckbrodsky.com/lyrics.html#TBB>
(Visited July 7, 2004).

Book:

The Catcher Was a Spy: The Mysterious Life of Moe Berg by Nicholas Dawidoff.
Biography of a man who might have pursued a number of careers but chose baseball.

Song: Chuck Brodsky's CD of *all* baseball songs, "The Baseball Ballads," in the folksy, countrified genre. CD includes tunes about Mo Berg's life as a baseball spy.
<http://www.chuckbrodsky.com/>

Film: CLOAK and Dagger (1946), 106 minutes/running time, United States Pictures/Warner Brothers, Black&White, Director: Fritz Lang, Leading Players are: *Gary Cooper, Lilli Palmer, Robert Alda, Vladimir Sokoloff, J. Edward Bromberg, Mariorie Hoshelle, Ludwig Stossel, Helene Thimig, Dan Seymour, Marc Lawrence, James Flavin*
Gary Cooper is a scientist who works with Lilli Palmer and the underground to smuggle a scientist out of Italy in WW II, an exciting, well-directed film based on a mission accomplished by OSS agent and former Brooklyn Dodgers player, Morris Berg. Flavin essays a role which is based on OSS chief William "Wild Bill" Donovan. (Available on video-cassette.)
http://www.angelfire.com/dc/1spy/film.html#CLOAK_AND_DAGGER