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This photo depicts Willy Fisher (later known as Rudolf Abel) with his wife, Yelena, during Fisher/Abel's home visit (to Moscow) in 1955. Image, provided by the Fishers' daughter, Evelyn, for a 1997 interview, and online via the Ogoniok Archive.

In the early part of 1959, Jim Donovan received an interesting letter from someone calling herself Rudolf Abel's wife.

Signed "E. Abel," the first letter arrived in Donovan's mailbox on February 13, 1959. Was it really from Yelena (Elya) Abel - Rudolf's wife - who also used Anglicized versions of her name (Helen, Helene or Ellen)?

Donovan doubted that the letters, which were mailed from Leipzig - then part of East Germany - were really from Mrs. Abel. They weren't written in her handwriting. Furthermore, Elya Abel and her daughter, Evelyn, were living near Moscow.

Why would she - or someone on her behalf - send Donovan a note from Leipzig?

The letter thanked Donovan for everything he did to "alleviate the fate of our dear husband and father." Then it inquired whether Abel needed any help.

Why would Abel's wife thank Donovan for his legal help a year-and-a-half after the trial was over? If the letter was from "Frau Abel," why wouldn't she have sent it in 1957, not in 1959?

But if the letter was a ruse, what was the purpose of the ruse? And who was behind it?

Donovan was intrigued and wanted to pursue the matter. The federal government agreed it was worth investigating.

Abel's lawyer wrote to "Frau Abel," advising that her husband was doing well. He let her know he was using his artistic skills - when he was arrested Abel had around 50 paintings in his studio - and was working in the commercial art department of the Atlanta federal penitentiary where he was incarcerated. In fact, Donovan wrote that the prisoner had:

*...produced some very lovely Christmas cards for use by his fellow inmates.*

Intrigue about the letters deepened when Donovan learned that Elya was actually writing to her husband - with

letters posted from Moscow - and her topics were far different from the ongoing Leipzig correspondence.

Someone else, with some other objective in mind, had to be behind the "Frau Abel" missives.

Then ... one day in April of 1960 - less than thirty days before Francis Gary Powers piloted his U-2 for the last time - Donovan had an interesting conversation with Rudolf Abel. The Supreme Court had denied Abel's appeal, in a close vote, which prompted this question from lawyer to client:

*Do you think your government will take steps to bring about your release, now that all hope of legal procedure is exhausted?*

Abel wasn't sure:

*I simply don't know. I think my biggest problem is that there is no American of sufficient importance in jail in Russia.*

Enter ... Francis Gary Powers.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/JAMES-DONOVAN-and-the-MYSTERIOUS-LETTERS-Bridge-of-Spies>

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## Media Stream



### Rudolf Abel and His Wife Yelena

Needing a rest in 1955, Rudolf Abel—then known to his Brooklyn neighbors as Emil Goldfus—returned to Moscow for a visit with his family (who knew him as William "Willy" Fisher).

This family photo depicts Fisher / Goldfus / Abel with his wife, Yelena, as they relaxed in Moscow.

A few years after this photograph was taken, Abel's lawyer—Jim Donovan—started receiving mysterious letters from someone purporting to be Abel's wife, Yelena.

The whole scenario, involving those letters, was very suspicious.

What made Donovan think that something wasn't exactly right about those letters?

They were postmarked from the German city of Leipzig (then part of East Germany).

But ... how could "Frau Abel" send letters from Leipzig when she was living in Russia??

William Fisher family photo, depicting Fisher - later known as Rudolf Abel - with his wife, Yelena, in 1955. Image provided by the Fishers' daughter, Evelyn, for a 1997 interview, and online via the Ogoniok Archive.

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