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Francis Gary Powers, in the dock during his espionage trial held in Moscow's Hall of Columns, during the summer of 1960. Image, by an unnamed photographer, online via the Office of the Historian at the U.S. Department of State. Public Domain.

It was Oliver Powers - father of Francis Gary Powers - who first thought the Soviet Union might be willing to negotiate for the release of his son in exchange for the release of Rudolf Abel.

Writing to Abel, the elder Powers asked whether an exchange made sense. Abel suggested that his wife should get involved.

With the approval of federal officials in Washington, Jim Donovan sent his correspondence with "Frau Abel" to an East German lawyer - Wolfgang Vogel - who claimed he was retained by Abel's wife.

All of this was taking place before Powers went through his trial. The Soviets were not interested in an exchange before the U-2 pilot was found guilty of espionage.

The first letter Donovan received from "Frau Abel," after Powers' conviction, said that Oliver Powers' idea about an exchange seemed "not only unreal but dangerous."

In February of 1961 - about two years after "she" posted her first letter to Donovan - "Frau Abel" sent an emotional appeal requesting clemency to America's new President, John F. Kennedy. The government didn't answer the letter.

Three months later, "Frau Abel" wrote to Donovan. This time she thought that Oliver Powers' original idea might actually work. Not only was Donovan encouraged, he reported to officials in Washington with these words:

I think it is perfectly evident that for the first time we have an offer to exchange Powers for Abel.
(See *Strangers on a Bridge*, by James Donovan, at [page 365](#).)

Things seemed to move forward even more when Donovan received a letter from "Frau Abel" on September 11, 1961. As Abel's lawyer had suggested, she'd visited the Soviet Embassy in Berlin. She reported these developments:

I gather from our talk that there is only one possible way to achieve success now - THAT IS SIMULTANEOUS RELEASE OF BOTH F. POWERS AND MY HUSBAND, WHICH CAN BE ARRANGED. (Quoted by Chesly Manly in a first-page *Chicago Tribune* article dated January 10, 1966.)

Could it be that the Soviets were ready to make a prisoner exchange? Might they be willing to swap a spy for a spy?

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

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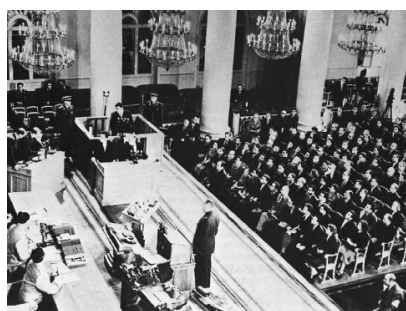
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Media Stream

Trial of Francis Gary Powers

After his U-2 was shot-down over Soviet territory, Francis Gary Powers—who was employed by America's CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)—was tried, in Moscow, as a spy.

The trial began on August 17, 1960. Because of all the Soviet media attention, it did not take place in a courtroom. Instead, trial was held in the Great Hall of Columns (also known as Pillar Hall) at the House of the Unions (Palace of Unions) in Moscow.



Known for its excellent acoustics, the building housed the Communist party during the Soviet era. The Great Hall was also the scene of Stalinist-era “show trials,” during the 1930s, and is used for concerts today.

Finished in three days, the trial was short although the impact on Powers would be long-term. He was sentenced to three years in prison and seven additional years at hard labor.

Although the crime carried the death penalty, the prosecutor had asked for fifteen years since Powers was remorseful, during trial, and had admitted that he was flying a reconnaissance plane over Soviet territory.

This image depicts Powers, in the dock, during his trial at Moscow's Hall of Columns.

Photo by an unnamed Soviet photographer; online via the U.S. Department of State.

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