



0. JAMES DONOVAN and WOLFGANG VOGEL - Story Preface

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Years after he worked with James Donovan on the spy-swap between the US and the USSR—exchanging Rudolf Abel (Willy Fisher) for Francis Gary Powers—Wolfgang Vogel appears at the Bridge of Spies (Glienicke Bridge). He revisited the famous bridge in 1997. Image, copyright AP, all rights reserved. Provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

As Jim Donovan worked-out the details for a prisoner exchange in Berlin, he needed to personally meet with Wolfgang Vogel.

Arriving at the East-German lawyer's office, with "Miss Abel" - purportedly Rudolf's daughter - Donovan was surprised. The neighborhood didn't look like a place where famous lawyers would have a law practice. Nor did the address - 113 Alt-Friedrichsfelde - where the office space was "second-rate residential."

Apprehensively climbing the stairs, to meet with Vogel, Donovan had at least one calming thought:

At such moments one is comforted by the thought that there is no point in worry since there is no place to run. (Strangers on a Bridge, by James Donovan, at page 397.)

To Donovan's relief, Vogel was actually at his office. He seemed professional:

He was about thirty-seven years old, dark-haired and good-looking with an ever-quick flashing smile. He wore a hand-tailored gray flannel suit, a white-on-white shirt, a figured silk tie with matching breast kerchief and elaborate cuff links. He looked like many successful sales executives in the United States. (Strangers, at page 398.)

With the help of a German-English interpreter, Donovan and Vogel discussed the key terms of the business at hand. Vogel had an official document for Donovan, signed by the Attorney General of East Germany. Translated into English it said:

It is hereby certified that the petition for release of your client to American authorities can be granted if the conditions known to you are met by the Americans.

As the two lawyers continued their discussions, Donovan clarified that the prisoner exchange would involve three, not four, people:

- Rudolf Abel;

- Francis Gary Powers; and
- Frederic Pryor.

The release of Marvin Makinen - on clemency grounds - would have to wait for another day.

Donovan was still skeptical of Wolfgang Vogel and his intentions (not to mention his actual authority to make a deal). He had previously backed-away from his assurances, but this time Donovan thought events would actually fall into place.

He was right to be skeptical. Just when he was about to signal an “all clear” to transport Rudolf Abel from his American prison, events took a wrong turn. The Soviet government agreed to a one-for-one exchange ... but it would be Pryor, not Powers, in exchange for Abel.

What?!?

Flatly disagreeing to even consider this “plan,” Donovan threatened to return to the States without any prisoner exchange at all.

After more fuss-around, with the latest talks pointing to an Abel-Powers-Pryor deal, Donovan was told that the Soviets considered Makinen a more-worthy exchange than Powers.

Exploding at the latest deception, Donovan reiterated the whole point of all the discussions was to swap Abel for Powers. If that didn't happen, all talks would end.

With February's cold and sleet reigning outside, heated talks between Donovan and his Soviet and East-German counterparts moved on.

Finally ... it was time to send for Abel. There would be a simultaneous exchange of three people. Pryor would be released separately, at West Berlin's “Checkpoint Charlie,” with Abel and Powers crossing the Glienicke Bridge.

Someone with a two-way radio would advise when everyone was in place.

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

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