



Wolfgang Vogel was the East-German lawyer with whom James Donovan negotiated to exchange Rudolf Abel for Francis Gary Powers.

Vogel was also the lawyer responsible for negotiating terms for *all* the spy swaps between the West and the Soviets during the Cold War. He grew rich as a result of all the deals he helped to broker.

One wonders how being rich could square with the philosophical beliefs of communism—a socio-economic system which rejects the capitalistic approach to life—under which Vogel, an East German, lived. Somehow, those economic restrictions did not apply to him.

Vogel lived until he was 82 years old. He died, following a heart attack, on August 21, 2008. By that time, Germany was reunited and the former East German was living in the lovely Bavarian town of Schliersee.



There is something interesting about Vogel's background which seems to track with the letters James Donovan received from "Frau Abel." Those letters were postmarked in Leipzig, then situated in East Germany. Vogel - who was born in Lower Silesia on October 30, 1925 - studied law both in Jena and in Leipzig after WWII.

When Vogel died, the BBC reported how many spies (and non-spies) he had helped to exchange:

In all, Vogel brokered the exchange of more than 150 spies and his swaps included the liberation of Soviet Jewish dissident Anatoly Shcharansky (now Natan Sharansky, an Israeli citizen) in 1986.

But he also helped to broker the transfer of more than 34,000 East German political prisoners and 215,000 ordinary citizens to the West, beginning in 1964.

West Germany paid nearly 3.5bn marks (\$2.7bn) for their liberation.

At the height of the tensions between East and West Germany, Vogel was the “point man” who brokered exchanges. In fact, according to the BBC, he was the only point man:

In its report on his death, the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle notes that "during the height of the Cold War in the late 50s, Vogel was the only point man" between West and East Germany because the two states denied having any official contacts at the time.

His lakeside villa, in Schliersee, was not the only mark of Vogel’s wealth. He reportedly drove a gold Mercedes and was always well-dressed:

He hardly seemed a typical communist apparatchik: with his English-style suits, gold Mercedes car and lakeside villa, Vogel was also handsomely rewarded by the West for his unique role in brokering the exchanges.

His wealthy lifestyle was noticed, however, by government officials.

After East and West Germany were reunited, Vogel was accused of swindling some of his clients, leading to a long trial (lasting one year) and a short prison term (for a conviction on perjury and falsifying documents). The BBC tells us more about it:

After reunification in 1989, Vogel was accused of fleecing some of his former East German clients of their properties and swindling his Western negotiating partners, and was briefly imprisoned in the 1990s.

Vogel's appeal, of his conviction, resulted in his acquittal. During the trial, he was found "not guilty" of blackmail.

In Steven Spielberg’s film “Bridge of Spies,” Wolfgang Vogel is portrayed by Sebastian Koch while James Donovan is portrayed by Tom Hanks.

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Wolfgang Vogel at the Glienicke Bridge. Photo by AP, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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Media Stream



Home of Wolfgang Vogel - Schliersee, Bavaria

This image depicts a view of Schliersee, a beautiful natural lake and small town located in Germany's Bavarian Alps, as seen—from Jägerkamp—on the 6th of September, 2006. Wolfgang Vogel, an East-German lawyer who brokered deals for all the East-West spies exchanged during the Cold War, lived in a lakeside villa in Schliersee. He also died there—following a heart attack—on the 21st of August, 2008.

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