



If the real name of Rudolf Abel—a main character in Steven Spielberg's film "Bridge of Spies," who is portrayed by Mark Rylance—is William ("Willy") Fisher, then who was the real *Rudolf Abel*?

The real Rudolf Abel is the man portrayed in this picture, as he appeared during 1937.

To understand why Willy Fisher used Abel's name, after his arrest in New York, we have to examine whether Fisher and Abel had a relationship. Did they know each other? Why did Fisher adopt Abel's name as his own?

For starters, Willy Fisher and Rudolf Ivanovich Abel were good friends who had served together in Soviet intelligence.

The real Rudolf Abel was born on the 23rd of September, 1900, in Riga (Latvia). His father was a chimney sweep. His mother was a homemaker.

Rudolf and his two brothers (Waldemar and Gottfried) lived at home, with their parents. In 1915, when he was 15 years old, Rudolf moved to Petrograd (as St. Petersburg was then called).

Living in Petrograd, young Rudolf embraced the ideals of Bolshevism and supported the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1918, he became a member of the Bolshevik Party.

During Russia's revolutionary war, while the younger-in-age Willy Fisher was still living in England, the real Rudolf Abel volunteered to serve as a stoker aboard a Bolshevik-supporting destroyer.

In January of 1920, Rudolf Ivanovich enlisted as a cadet and became part of the Baltic Fleet stationed at Kronstadt. After serving on ships, he headed the radio telegraph station on Bering Island (between 1923-24), then commanded the maritime radio operators on the Commander Islands (also located in the Bering Sea).

Fluent in English, German and French—in addition to Russian—the real Rudolf Abel married Anna Antonovna in 1925. That same year, Abel was sent to work at the Soviet Consulate in Shanghai, China.

In July of 1926, Rudolf Ivanovich moved to Beijing, where he worked as a radio operator until diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and China became strained in 1929.

While abroad, Abel also became an employee of the Foreign Department of the OGPU (foreign intelligence)—in 1927—and served as a cipher specialist. He worked in various countries, for the Soviet intelligence agency, until he returned to Moscow during the fall of 1936.

At about the same time, Willy Fisher also returned to Moscow. The two worked together and became good friends. They often ate together as well.

So close were Willy and Rudolf that Willy's daughter—Evelyn Fisher—called Abel "Uncle Rudolf." (Willy's own brother had died, years before, trying to save a drowning girl). During an interview, in 1997, she noted that "Uncle Rudolf was often at our home."

During World War II, the real Rudolf Abel and Willy Fisher served in different locations and had different jobs. After the war, however, their friendship continued.

Rudolf Ivanovich was awarded several honors for his wartime service, including: Order of the Red Banner, two Orders of the Red Star, numerous military medals and the badge "Honored Worker of the NKVD" (as the "People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs"—or, Secret Police—was known).

With the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, the real Rudolf Abel left the state security system on September 27, 1946.

Rudolf Abel and Willy Fisher followed separate paths when Fisher left for America in 1948. Although their family friendship continued, Rudolf Ivanovich died suddenly in December of 1955. He is buried in Moscow's German cemetery.

As a result of his death, about eighteen months before Willy Fisher's arrest at Manhattan's Hotel Latham, the real Rudolf Abel never knew that his friend had adopted his name. But intelligence officials in Moscow, who knew of Fisher-and-Abel's friendship, quickly figured-out the real name of the person in U.S. custody.

For the rest of his life, Willy Fisher used the name of his friend—Rudolf Abel.

Credits:

Story of the real Rudolf Ivanovich Abel based on the Russian-language "Chronicles of Ragnarök," published on 11 June 2012 via "Live Journal" and retrieved on 24 September 2015.

Photo of the real Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, as he appeared in 1937 while employed by the NKVD, © Press Office of CBP. Image used here as fair use for educational purposes.

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