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## Our man in Berlin

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Next to getting your facts straight, one of the challenges of writing about historical figures is dealing with other characters who pop up and start hijacking the narrative. These are people who keep doing things so unexpected and compelling that you must find out what made them tick. The problem is that they've usually been dead for years, along with anyone who knew them. Left with bits of information – when they were born, where they went to school, whom they married, where they worked – you have to hope that something drops into your lap that helps to explain them. Sometimes that catalyst is simply finding out that your guy was a Rotarian.

For me, that guy was George Messersmith, a U.S. diplomat in Berlin in the early 1930s. He was the guy who approved Albert Einstein's visa – though not before consulate staff questioned the physicist about his political beliefs. He was also the guy who first alerted the British government that a serious problem was about to land on its plate after learning that two acquaintances, Britain's former King Edward VIII and his girlfriend, Wallis Simpson, were palling around with several top Nazis.

But Messersmith is best-remembered as one of the first U.S. government officials to sound the alarm against Adolf Hitler. In 1933, when everyone else was dismissing Hitler as a gutter politician who would be easy to manipulate, Messersmith recognized him for what he was: a dangerous psychopath capable of bringing the world down around him. He waged such a bloody-minded one-man war against Hitler that before long, the mere mention of Messersmith's name would leave the Führer enraged. It also earned him, within certain Berlin circles, a sobriquet: "the terror of Nazi Germany."

Diplomats are supposed to be diplomatic. It was said of Talleyrand, the great 18th-century French political adventurer, that he could hold his tongue in at least seven languages. George Messersmith couldn't hold his tongue in even one. He called it as he saw it. And if anyone couldn't handle that, well, that was their problem.

I first ran across Messersmith while researching the life of Martha Dodd, the 1930s socialite-turned-Soviet spy. Martha, the excessively free-spirited daughter of William E. Dodd, the first U.S. ambassador to Nazi Germany, embarked on a dizzying number of affairs with members of the new Nazi elite. Along the way, she met and promptly fell in love with a dashing Russian diplomat who was also Berlin's NKVD resident, who just as promptly recruited her into the Soviet secret service.

As salacious as Martha Dodd's story is, there is also something pathetically inevitable about its trajectory. George Messersmith's life is quite the opposite. If there was anything inevitable about it, it was his tendency to be true to himself and to never take the easy path, regardless of the cost.

Born in 1883 in southeastern Pennsylvania, Messersmith was the son of a local businessman who died when George was a child. Highly ambitious but unable to afford college, Messersmith got a teaching certificate and went to work in a one-room schoolhouse in Delaware. He was quickly promoted, eventually becoming vice president of the Delaware State Board of Education.

In 1916, two years after joining the State Department, he was sent to Curaçao, in the Dutch West Indies. War was raging in Europe, and Curaçao, being neutral, was a hotbed of spies and skulduggery. Messersmith got wind of a German spy ring operating there and cracked its code. As a result, a number of its members were caught.

In 1930, Messersmith was named consul general in Germany. The Foreign Service's diplomatic and consular corps operated as parallel, very nearly separate entities. Unlike ambassadors, who are direct emissaries from one head of state to another, consuls look after their nation's business interests and those of their citizens traveling and living abroad.

This seemed to suit Messersmith just fine. He knew how to operate both officially and informally, tapping into the wide network of contacts he had all over Germany. In this sense, he was more like a business executive, which may have been why he was a member of the Rotary Club of Berlin. The club, chartered in 1929, was a popular meeting place for Berlin's rising business, professional, and intellectual classes, and Messersmith found it a good place to develop friendly contacts and share opinions.

"I attend this luncheon whenever possible," he reported to the secretary of state in November 1933, "as I find it one of the ways in which I can keep contact of a personal character with many people whom I do not otherwise see. ... There are usually guests from various countries present at these luncheons and there are usually also from twenty to thirty guests from other Rotary clubs in Germany. The luncheons therefore have during the past three years been very interesting."

Weimar-era Berlin had been a lively place, full of art and culture, with dozens of daily newspapers and a democratic discourse that flourished in coffeehouses, cabarets, professional chambers, and the streets. By the end of the 1920s, the Nazis were among the largest political

parties, but their fortunes tended to ebb and flow with the shaky economic situation. In January 1933, Germany's president, Paul von Hindenburg, appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor. The president wasn't thought to care much for Hitler, and many, including Messersmith, didn't expect him to last long.

But Hitler moved quickly. By March that year, the Nazis had control of the German parliament, and Jews began to be dismissed from government jobs and Jewish businesses boycotted and their owners publicly humiliated. Different Nazi groups, jockeying for power, set up their own makeshift prisons. People were arrested and beaten, sometimes to death. Messersmith witnessed it all, and the reports he sent to Washington detailed Germany's rapid descent from democracy to brutal dictatorship.

Some of the victims were Americans. In one report, Messersmith detailed how a group of storm troopers dragged three American tourists off to one of their jails. They were beaten unconscious and tossed out onto the street the next morning. In another, he reported springing an American seaman from a Hamburg prison after the man had gotten into a heated drunken political discussion and insulted Hitler. Incidents like this were now happening all the time. But even though American reporters in Germany filed the stories to their editors, they rarely made it into print. The Nazis excelled at PR and presented an attractive image to the world.

Messersmith became a sort of information clearinghouse for his journalist friends, showing them reports and getting them out of trouble whenever the Nazis cracked down. When dignitaries or well-known opinion-makers came to Berlin, he would invite them out for lunch to feed them the facts. Slowly, he started making headway.

None of this got past Hitler, who was extremely sensitive about his portrayal in the media. Normally, the German government would have taken its complaint to the U.S. ambassador – but there wasn't one. After the resignation of Ambassador Frederic Sackett in March 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had a difficult time filling the job. Until the end of August that year, Consul General Messersmith was running things, and Hitler already knew that any emissary he sent to the embassy was likely to come away with nothing but an earful of blunt opinions.

Hitler and Messersmith probably never met. Hitler, being a bully, disliked confrontation when he couldn't dominate, and Messersmith was all too ready to tell him exactly what he didn't want to hear. Messersmith did know some of Hitler's underlings quite well, including Hermann Goering, who even invited himself to dine at Messersmith's home on at least one occasion. "Goering is strong, intelligent, and well-informed on some subjects, but naive as a child on others," Messersmith wrote in a report.

With newspapers under strict government control, ordinary Germans tended to believe whatever the Nazi media told them. During one Rotary meeting when Messersmith brought up the brutal treatment of Jews, several members insisted that it wasn't any different from what was happening in the United States. After all, they asked in apparent earnestness, didn't

America have its own “Jewish problem”? Messersmith realized that many otherwise intelligent Germans had entered a fantasy world.

The Nazi regime’s attitude toward Rotary was mixed. Active Rotary clubs seemed like a good way to help the Third Reich achieve respectability and international acceptance. But the Nazis were suspicious of any international organization. For a while, they let the clubs continue to operate, even allowing them to retain their Jewish members. “The fact that Jews are permitted to continue membership in Rotary is being used as propaganda among Rotary clubs throughout the world,” Messersmith wrote in a report to Washington.

For a period during the summer of 1933, Messersmith thought the top Nazi leadership might be becoming more moderate, but then he realized he was wrong. “What they most want to do,” he wrote, “is make Germany the most capable instrument of war that has ever existed.” War might still be years away, but Hitler was making it inevitable. Messersmith’s recommendation: “forcible intervention from the outside,” and soon.

At the end of August, the new U.S. ambassador, William E. Dodd, took up his post in Berlin; he had arrived the previous month with his soon-to-be-notorious daughter in tow. Dodd, a university professor and yeoman farmer, was unabashedly pro-German, having earned his doctorate in Leipzig nearly four decades earlier. He and his family readily confessed a certain level of anti-Semitism, though “certainly no worse than anyone else,” as his daughter put it.

Dodd had read a number of Messersmith’s reports while still in Washington. While admitting he knew almost nothing about the situation in Germany, he nevertheless tended to dismiss them as biased and alarmist. After he arrived, he told Messersmith that nothing he or his family had seen bore any resemblance to what was in the reports. Dodd thought his first meeting with Hitler had gone very well.

Dodd’s opinions wouldn’t remain intact for very long. Historians have documented his conversion to a fervent anti-Nazi. But Dodd’s journey began with Messersmith, and though he was ultimately grateful to him for it, he still didn’t like having Messersmith around. He saw the steady flow of lengthy reports, some going directly to FDR’s desk, as an indication that Messersmith coveted the ambassador post. Dodd suggested that Messersmith’s antagonistic relationship with the German government was a clear sign he had “outstayed his assignment,” and he lobbied hard to get him reassigned. Early in 1934, Dodd got his wish.

Messersmith went to Vienna as minister to Austria, where he continued to defy the Nazis. In 1939, FDR appointed him to lead something called the Second Counter-Intelligence Panel, where he went head-to-head with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who thought that all intelligence activities, foreign and domestic, rightfully belonged on his plate.

After stints as ambassador to Cuba and Mexico, Messersmith’s final diplomatic post was in 1946 as ambassador to Argentina. U.S. relations with that country were rough at the time because of Argentina’s friendly treatment of fleeing Nazis. Messersmith believed he was making progress with the Argentine government, but in 1947 he lost the support of President

Harry Truman, who fired him.

If Messersmith was downhearted over this, he didn't show it. He returned to Mexico City and became the head of Mexican Power and Light Co. Even though his days of public service were officially behind him, it appears his work as an intelligence operative was not. When he died in 1960, officials from the U.S. Embassy immediately went to his home in Cuernavaca, seized a large pile of papers from his files, and burned them.

Brendan McNally

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