

THE LAST FLIGHT FROM TALLINN

A FOREIGN SERVICE CODE CLERK FINALLY RECEIVES RECOGNITION FOR HIS SACRIFICE
IN THE LINE OF DUTY TWO-THIRDS OF A CENTURY AGO.

BY ERIC A. JOHNSON AND ANNA HERMANN

On May 4, during this year's Foreign Affairs Day observances, the American Foreign Service Association will inscribe the names of several U.S. Foreign Service employees, all killed overseas in the line of duty, on the marble memorial plaques it maintains in the State Department's C Street lobby.

One of those individuals, Henry W. Antheil Jr., had his career cut tragically short on June 14, 1940. His plane, the "Kaleva," exploded at 2:05 p.m. local time, shortly after taking off from Tallinn's Ülemiste Airport en route to Helsinki.

Antheil (pronounced ANN-tile) was carrying three diplomatic pouches from the U.S. legations in Tallinn, Riga and Helsinki on the very day that the Soviet blockade of Estonia went into effect. Soviet troops had already been based in the country since Oct. 18, 1939, as a result of a secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had signed earlier that year.

An Associated Press wire story about the tragedy appeared the following day and was picked up by the *New York Times* (under the lead, "Finnish Air Crash Kills U.S. Diplomat"). The June 24, 1940, edition of *Time* magazine ran the following item: "Died: Henry W. Antheil Jr., 27, attaché of the U.S. Legation at Helsinki, younger brother of

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noted composer George Antheil; when the Finnish airliner in which he was flying from Tallinn, Estonia, to Helsinki mysteriously exploded in mid-air and plunged into the Gulf of Finland." And on July 17, 1940, a very short and incomplete "exclusive" appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* under the headline: "Finnish Airliner Mystery Solved: Russians Shot Down American Courier."

Overall, however, the news of the Soviet blockade of Estonia and the downing of Antheil's plane were both overshadowed by a much bigger story that broke on the other side of Europe on the same date: the Nazi occupation of Paris.

A Quest for Adventure

Henry Antheil Jr. was born in 1912 in Trenton, N.J., one of four children to Henry William Antheil, owner of a shoe store, and his wife Wilhemine Huse, both Lutheran immigrants from Germany. Growing up in New Jersey, Henry was captivated by the life of his older brother George (1900-1959), an avant-garde composer who lived abroad in Paris and Berlin before ending his career in Hollywood, where he scored such classic films as "In a Lonely Place" (1950), starring Humphrey Bogart and directed by Nicolas Ray. As the title of his 1945 autobiography suggests, George Antheil was widely known as the "Bad Boy of Music" for his notorious "Ballet Mécanique" (1926) and other controversial compositions.

Not very much is known about Henry's early life in the shadow of his famous brother. We do know that Henry enrolled at Rutgers University in the fall of 1931, after graduating from Trenton Central High School, where he studied German and served as vice president of the public speaking club.

During George's occasional visits to the family home in Trenton and through their frequent exchanges of letters, Henry pressed him for information about life in Europe. He even asked if he could accompany him as his personal secretary. George turned down that request, instead suggesting that Henry join the U.S. Foreign Service.

In the fall of 1933, George put Henry in touch with William C. Bullitt, the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, who was a friend of George's. During a meeting in Washington, the photogenic Henry talked Bullitt into taking him along to Moscow to help open the new U.S. embassy. He left for the Soviet Union in February 1934 to pursue his European dream without finishing his education at Rutgers. (At the height of the Great Depression, an exciting job probably seemed more attractive than a college degree.)

Because he was not a Foreign Service officer, Henry's role at the embassy was largely clerical — although seldom routine. As George F. Kennan recalled in the Pulitzer prize-winning first volume of his *Memoirs* (1967): "We were in many respects a pioneer enterprise — a wholly new type of American diplomatic mission — the model and precursor of a great many missions of the latter day. We were the first to cope seriously, for example, with the problems of security — of protection of codes and files and the privacy of intra-office discussion — in a hostile environment. For this purpose, Bullitt brought in a detachment of Marine sergeants in civilian clothes" — the first-ever Marine security guards at a U.S. embassy.

Anheil ended up in charge of the embassy code room, transmitting telegrams written by George F. Kennan, Loy W. Henderson, Charles E. Bohlen, John C. Wiley and other key U.S. diplomats. After Bullitt's 1936 departure, he served under two other ambassadors in Moscow, Joseph Davies and Laurence Steinhardt.

While it appears that Anheil studied some Russian (Amb. Bullitt encouraged everyone on his staff to do so), he would still have lived a rather insulated existence. But he enjoyed being part of the diplomatic life that revolved around the ambassador's residence — experiences vividly captured in Charles W. Thayer's *Bears in the Caviar* (1951) and Irena Wiley's *Around the Globe in 20 Years* (1962).

Embassy life suited Anheil, as his brother George recounts in his 1945 autobiography *The Bad Boy of Music*:

"Henry was in Moscow now, a young attaché of the U.S. embassy and, in reality, one of our foremost war experts. He was then the 'brilliant young man' of the State Department; he had a sort of roving commission. His quest for more knowledge took him all over Europe."

In an unpublished letter dated Aug. 25, 1940, George wrote: "Henry lived a lone [sic] and dangerous life, traveling from country to country, followed by foreign agents from border to border, never knowing what moment might be his last." But even though he was blessed with matinee-idol good looks, Henry never seems to have spent any time in the diplomatic spotlight. Instead, it was assignments as a diplomatic courier that took him across Europe.

Motives for Murder?

In November 1939, Anheil got himself transferred from Moscow to the U.S. legation in Helsinki, where he was officially posted as a code clerk. Describing his character, H.F.

Arthur Schoenfeld, the minister in charge of the legation, emphasized his "sunny disposition, industry, enthusiasm for his work and high ability."

As luck would have it, he arrived in Finland right before the start of the Winter War and the Soviet bombing of Helsinki on Nov. 30, 1939. In search of safety, the U.S. legation evacuated to temporary quarters in the resort hotel of Bad Grankulla (also known as Kauniainen) outside of Helsinki. It was at this spa, where Alexander Kerensky gathered strength before leading

the Russian Revolution, that Anheil met and fell in love with Greta Lindberg in December 1939. Not long afterward, the couple were engaged.

Born in 1915, Greta was also working out of temporary quarters at the Bad Grankulla Hotel along with her fellow employees from the Sport Articles Company (the ski company and the spa shared a common owner). She was an active member of the patriotic Lotta Svärd (a Finnish women's auxiliary organization) and distinguished herself while helping at the front during the Winter War. But even out at Bad Grankulla the war was never far away: while cross-country skiing with Major Frank B. Hayne (the legation's military attaché) on Sunday, Jan. 14, 1940, Henry witnessed the Soviet bombing of Schoenfeld's villa in nearby Koklax and rushed over with his colleagues to help put out the flames.

Only seven months into his posting to Helsinki, Anheil

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flew down to Tallinn on the morning of June 14, 1940, taking an Estonian commercial flight. Henry and Greta had just spent a happy getaway weekend in Tallinn on June 1-2. But he would never complete the short 50-mile journey back to Helsinki.

After learning of their son's death on June 15, Henry Anheil Sr. and his wife sent the following telegram to Secretary of State Cordell Hull: "We appreciate your words of sympathy. While deeply grieved, we know that Henry loved his work and his country even to giving his life for it. We will appreciate any further information you can give us."

Further information turned out to be rather difficult to get, however. Both the Finns and Estonians launched investigations, but these inquiries went nowhere once the Soviet occupation of Estonia became a fait accompli on June 16, 1940. From then until the collapse of the

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Soviet Union a half-century later, any public mention of the incident was considered taboo.

Although the plane crashed several kilometers north of Keri Island, the

wreckage was never found and the nine bodies on board were never recovered. Documents in Russian, Finnish and Estonian archives are equally elusive. A Finnish commission assigned to investigate the crash did not clarify matters when it issued a cryptic report on June 17, 1940, concluding that "the explosion was caused by an external factor."

Despite such obstacles, Estonian and Finnish investigators have recently pieced together eyewitness accounts confirming that two Soviet bombers downed the "Kaleva" — despite the fact that the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland had officially ended three months earlier, on March 13, 1940.

Some Estonians have mistakenly identified Anheil as the first U.S. official to die in World War II. That distinction actually belongs to Captain Robert M. Losey, killed by a German bomb in Oslo on April 21, 1940, while



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assigned to the U.S. legation in Helsinki as air attaché (see “The First American Official Killed in This War” by J. Michael Cleverley; December 2003 *Foreign Service Journal*). But Henry may well have been the first official U.S. casualty of the Cold War.

Speculation as to why the Soviet Naval Air Force shot down the flight from Tallinn swirls around several different theories. Perhaps the Soviets thought that it was ferrying Estonia’s gold outside the country (a popular urban legend), or taking Estonian President Konstantin Päts into exile. A third theory, perhaps the most compelling, is that the plane was shot down to prevent the diplomatic pouches on board the plane from leaving Estonia. Some Estonian researchers believe that Antheil’s pouches contained secret information detailing the Soviet Union’s future plans for the Baltic region — plans that the Estonian general staff had

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turned over to an unidentified U.S. government official just hours before Antheil boarded the plane.

The “Kaleva” also carried two French diplomatic couriers. Accord-

ing to a June 19, 1940, report by John C. Wiley, the minister in charge of the U.S. legations in Riga and Tallinn, the French diplomatic pouches may have included dispatches from French Ambassador Erik Labonne in Moscow reporting on his recent conversations with Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov — conversations the Soviets might not have wanted to fall into German hands. Wiley’s source for this information appears to have been General Johan Laidoner, commander-in-chief of the Estonian armed forces, whom he’d met with earlier that same day.

But perhaps the simplest explanation is the best: overzealous Soviet pilots decided to shoot first and ask questions later while enforcing the new Soviet blockade of Estonia. This was to become an all-too-familiar Soviet pattern. Just 12 years later (almost to the day), on June 13, 1952, a Soviet MiG-15 shot down a Swedish

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Douglas DC-3 over international waters as it was monitoring Soviet installations in occupied Estonia. Whether such actions were designed to provoke a reaction or serve as a show of force is still open to debate.

Skeletons in the Closet

Henry Antheil became the subject of controversy within the State Department immediately after his death. His work as a code clerk came under intense scrutiny when the legation staff member tasked with going through his possessions on June 20, 1940, discovered evidence in his apartment closet that he had failed to protect U.S. diplomatic codes properly.

Specifically, as materials from a recently declassified internal State Department investigation indicate, he had falsified assignment cables in order to remain together with his Finnish fiancée, Greta — and had been supplying his brother George

with snippets from Embassy Moscow reporting cables. This material, documenting Stalin's purges and the dark side of the Soviet Union, served as background information for George's articles in *Esquire* and his prophetic pamphlet, *The Shape of the War to Come* (1940). When many of his predictions came true, George was recruited by the *Los Angeles Times* to be one of their war correspondents.

A man of many talents, brother George went on to patent spread-spectrum (frequency-hopping) technology together with Hollywood movie star Hedy Lamarr in 1942. Both believed that German fascism and Soviet communism were simply different sides of the same totalitarian coin.

Married to a Hungarian Jew named Böski Markus, George developed a first-hand aversion for totalitarian regimes while living in Germany in the 1930s. Born into a

Jewish family in Austria, Hedy made her way to Hollywood after escaping both the Nazis and her first marriage to prominent fascist Friedrich Mandl, an Austrian weapons manufacturer. (After World War II, Mandl fled to Argentina, where he worked both as an adviser to strongman President Juan Perón and as a movie producer. He later introduced leading lady Eva Duarte to her future husband.)

Hoping that their invention would aid the ongoing war effort, they offered the patent to the U.S. Navy for use in its torpedo guidance systems. Unfortunately, their invention was 20 years ahead of its time, and the U.S. Navy was only able to make practical use of the idea for the first time during the Cuban blockade of 1962. Today, spread-spectrum technology is an essential part of mobile telecommunications and is used in everything from mobile phones to WiFi.

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Henry got into trouble a second time after his death. During the 1950s "Red Scare" in the United States, finger-pointing by an inside informant (who had apparently heard rumors of the State Department's internal investigation) led to a posthumous FBI investigation to see if he had been a Soviet agent.

In January 1956, the FBI concluded that State Department and "Bureau files contain no details concerning Antheil's involvement in Soviet espionage activities" and that "no further investigation is recommended at this time." (Back in Helsinki in June 1940, Henry's fiancée Greta had been the subject of a background check of her own.)

Memories of Antheil continued to fade until the beginning of the 21st century, when a series of articles in the Estonian and Finnish press generated renewed interest in the story of the "Kaleva." At about the same time,

*Although Antheil did
not speak Russian,
by all accounts
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suited him.*

Aero Airlines resumed regularly scheduled flights between Helsinki and Tallinn using French-built ATR-72 twin-turboprops.

Although the Finnish Aero Company changed its name to Finnair in 1953 (Finnair still uses the original OH call sign on its planes), Aero was reborn in March 2002 as Finnair's

Estonian subsidiary. (Finnair had already resumed flying between Helsinki and Tallinn in March 1990 after a 50-year hiatus.)

On June 14, 2005, Estonian, Finnish and Russian researchers gathered for a symposium at the Helsinki Aviation Museum to mark the 65th anniversary of the incident. That same year, Ants Vist, Toivo Kallas and the Estonian company "Polar Films" began working on a documentary film on the fate of the "Kaleva." Thanks to a grant issued by the U.S. embassy in Tallinn, a Polar Films crew traveled to the U.S. in October and November 2006 to interview Antheil's surviving relatives.

Fittingly, Henry Antheil's name will forever be within sight of the black-blue-white Estonian flag that hung in the State Department's main lobby throughout the five long decades of Soviet occupation, waiting patiently for the next flight from Tallinn. ■



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