

## A Tale of Two Men

by Society Historian Raymond J. Batvinis (1972-1997)



Raymond Batvinis

What follows is a story of two men. One an American and the other English. One the hunter; the other relying on deception for survival. Both of them worlds apart in distance and background, yet moving through time along strangely parallel lines. Their fate was to meet one blistering hot morning in a drab New York City hotel

room 60 years ago this month. It would be a history-making encounter.

### Willy Fisher

Our tale begins on July 11, 1903 with the birth of William August Fisher, or “Willy” as the family called him, in a row-house at 140 Clara Street in England’s northeast industrial city of Newcastle Upon Tyne. His 29-year-old German father, a shipyard worker named Heinrich Mathau Fisher, had fled from Russia to England in 1901 following five years of internal exile for fomenting revolution against the czar.

Heinrich may have exchanged Russia’s political turmoil for more peaceful climes but his revolutionary zeal remained firmly intact. Despite a good job, a decent salary and a settled family life, radical politics were never far from his thoughts. From the moment he arrived in England, he resumed his war against the czar’s suppression of his political opponents. Beginning with trade union agitation and distribution of radical literature to Russian ship crewmen visiting Newcastle, Heinrich moved to smuggling weapons and explosives to Marxist revolutionaries in Russia. By the summer of 1921, with Lenin firmly entrenched in the Kremlin, the Fisher family returned to the country from which Heinrich had fled 20 years earlier.

### Paul Blasco

As Willy, now 17, settled into Moscow’s routine, halfway across the world in Harrisburg, PA, Andy and Mary Blasco awaited the birth of their eighth child. Both were Slovak, born in Austria – Hungary. They arrived in America before the turn of the century along with millions of other East Europeans to feed the Industrial Revolution’s hunger for unskilled labor. On June 2, 1921 the couple welcomed their eighth child, a boy, named Paul James Blasco. Three more children would follow over the next few years.

For years, Andy Blasco worked in the mills of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, while Mary kept the house and raised the kids. Home life centered on family, and grandparents living across the street along with extended Slovak family members and neighbors. Paul and his ten siblings spoke Slovak despite their parent’s insistence on speaking English like every other American. The glue holding the neighborhood together, besides language and culture, was the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, where the family attended Sunday mass and the parish school which all the little Blascos walked to every day.

Paul was eight in October 1929 when Wall Street crashed, ushering in the Great Depression and forcing millions of Americans like Andy out of work. Pennsylvania’s industries experienced devastating layoffs with unemployment figures reaching nearly 40 percent by 1933. That same month in Moscow, Willy and Elena Lebedeva, his wife of two years, greeted Evelyn, their first and only child. Now a junior officer in the Russian secret police known as the NKVD with two years of radio training behind him and a young family for cover, Fisher began preparing for his first undercover mission. Posing as a wealthy British businessman, he set out in 1931 for a three-year tour to Stockholm.

### Rudolph Abel

In 1937, as a newly-promoted lieutenant, Willy Fisher was made the head of a radio training school for intelligence officers, operating undercover in foreign countries. His personal world changed, as well, with the assignment of Rudolf Ivanovich Abel to Fisher’s school. Three years older than his boss, Abel was born in Riga, Latvia to a chimney sweep and his wife. After dropping out of school at the age of fourteen and three years of drifting, he became embroiled in Red politics after joining the Russian Navy. In the years to come, his training as a radio operator led to a foreign posting at Moscow’s embassy in Shanghai. Fisher and Abel soon became inseparable, sharing visits and meals together, exchanging intimate details about their past, and building a friendship that would continue to the end of their lives.

Stalin’s brutal purges in the 1930s did not spare the two friends. First to go was Abel. His only crime — guilt by family association. As an original Communist Party member and Lenin loyalist, Abel’s brother, Waldemar, had made a two-decade climb up the party apparatus ladder to the rank of political commissar — a prestigious position overseeing the ideological orthodoxy of thousands of Russians working in the Baltic shipyards. Waldemar’s arrest without warning



Gene A. Fuhrman

in December 1937 on charges of conspiring against Stalin was followed by conviction, execution and disappearance in a mass grave near Leningrad along with 216 others. Fisher's turn came a year later. For the next three years, he existed in a surreal world — a non-person, shunned by everyone, with no job, no income, a family to feed and a constant dread of arrest and disappearance.

If Willy Fisher had his Abel, then Paul Blasco had Gene A. Fuhrman. From their first meeting as freshmen at Harrisburg Catholic High School (CHS), they formed a friendship that would continue for the remainder of their lives. In 1947, Gene joined the

FBI as an Agent and his two sons would later become FBI Agents as well.

During those desperate years in Harrisburg, Paul often found himself as the family's only bread winner. Along with a paper route, he routinely got up at three in the morning and headed downtown with his wagon to haul groceries. Paul's daughter, Anne Sobocienski, recalled that her dad rarely talked about those times except to say that the family "always struggled financially."



Harrisburg Catholic High School graduation photo 1940

But Paul was a kid who did things that kids do. There were the endless hours just hanging out with his buddies, hopping trains and summertime fishing and swimming in the Susquehanna River. One time, after spying on a Ku Klux Klan meeting, he and some friends followed a "klucker" who, it turned out, lived in their neighborhood.

Fisher's terror markedly contrasted with the joy in the Blasco household when young Paul proudly walked across a stage in June 1940 holding a high school diploma in front of his beaming parents and friends. Over his four years at CHS, he kept up his grades and excelled at track and football. By the fall of 1939, with Europe at war for the second time in the

century, Paul, now in his senior year and football team captain, quarterbacked his squad to the Central Pennsylvania Valley championship. His reward for all of the grit and hard work was a football scholarship to Mt. St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg, MD. It was his salvation — he would be the only one of his ten brothers and sisters to get a college education.

As Paul entered his sophomore year of college in the fall of 1941, Fisher, suddenly and without warning, found himself rehabilitated and returned to the ranks of the NKVD. His redemption only happened because Hitler's June 1941 surprise attack on the Soviet Union left Russia with a shortage of experienced radio operators. Once again, Willy found himself teaching undercover radio techniques to young recruits.



George McLaughlin, Donald Troup, Anthony Yoviscin, Paul Blasco, John O'Connor, awaiting the signal, which John McLaughlin will give.

Track 1939=1940

Mt. St. Mary's College was one of hundreds of colleges and universities around the country hit hard by the Second World War. Enrollment dwindled as men began leaving for military service even before the December 1941 Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. Compounding these losses was an April 1, 1942 expiration deadline for draft deferments. Small colleges, particularly less affluent ones, felt these departures more acutely. One study found that between the autumn of 1942 and the autumn of 1943, enrollment in 446 church colleges, like Mt. St. Mary's, dropped nearly 30 percent overall with the decline in men exceeding more than 60 percent.

Paul was enrolled in a program leading to a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration. The Mt. St. Mary's catalogue for the period described the course arrangement as "especially adapted for those who desire to enter, in executive capacities, the business profession." Taking



Paul Blasco, Mt. St. Mary's College

this mission to heart, Paul soon became known around campus as the "A. A. Czar" for single handedly taking charge of the college athletic association as its new president. Between studying and playing ball, he reorganized rosters while cobbling together teams by drawing students from different classes. He also readjusted game schedules, managed all aspects of the intramural program

and did all he could during those troubled years to help hold together the school's athletic program. In the end, however, the war finally took its toll. Paul was forced to double-up his courses with classes that compressed a four-year program into three. Paul and his high school pal, Gene Fuhrman, graduated on May 12, 1943 with 30 other classmates. Both were 21 years old.

While Paul toiled away in the hills of Maryland, Fisher was creating radio stratagems designed to confuse and bewilder German forces on the Eastern Front. One of his first successes was Operation Monastery. Working with military intelligence, the NKVD created "Throne," an imaginary underground organization of German sympathizers complete with a puppet government ready to take over when the final Nazi victory was complete. "Monastery" gave Russian forces a key advantage during the battle of Stalingrad by convincing the Germans that carefully planned diversionary attacks were the real thing.

On the heels of Monastery, came another daring ploy designed to befuddle the German retreat from Russia. Called Operation Berezina, the NKVD, using a captured German officer, convinced the Nazis that he led a small collection of troops who had survived the Russian onslaught and were then building "Flamingo," codename for a guerrilla team behind enemy lines that was slowing the Russian advance. With Fisher in charge of phony radio broadcasts, the enemy completely swallowed the lie. Despite mounting losses, the Germans invested precious time and resources until the end of the war, flying in radio equipment, food, medical supplies and ammunition as well as vast amounts of money

for informers. One Russian leader later described Operation Berezina as the most successful radio deception game of the war with Willie Fisher as its "chief radio operator."

On a tiny atoll less than a thousand miles from Tokyo, Blasco's terrifying trial was about to begin. Gone were the days of classrooms and athletic heroics. Following a three-



Captain Paul Blasco



Blasco, right, with fellow Marines

day pounding by offshore naval forces 23-year-old Captain Paul Blasco, now a company commander, along with another 77,000 Marines, waded on to the beaches of Iwo Jima. The date was February 19, 1945. Facing them were 22,000 Japanese soldiers and marines, all fanatically determined to die for their emperor rather than surrender. Knowing that defeat was certain, the Japanese commander planned a campaign that he hoped would make the inevitable Marine victory so costly that any thought of invading Japan's home islands would recoil the Americans.

What followed bore no resemblance to modern warfare. Marines rarely saw the enemy. Instead they had to dig them out from 13,000 yards of honeycombed self-sustaining and interlocking tunnels under the island's volcanic crust anchored by 5,000 fortified entrances and pillboxes. Like thousands of other Marines, Blasco and his men faced a Dante's Inferno of hand-to-hand combat and relentless advancement from one cave entrance to another, all the time burning the enemy out using flame throwers that shot liquid streams of death 30 feet long.

When the battle ended 36 days later, the human toll was almost unimaginable. Marine casualties totaled nearly 26,000. Six thousand were dead. Blasco's Third Marine Division sustained a 60 percent casualty rate among rifle regiments. The Third was lucky. Fourth and Fifth losses were 15 percent higher. As for the Japanese — less than 1,100 survived. In the words of one historian, the five-week fight for Iwo Jima was "more costly in overall ground casualties than the entire five-month battle of Guadalcanal." Navy Secretary James Forrestal, so moved by the losses, ruefully remarked that "I can never again see a United States Marine without feeling reverence."

For their wartime service, Stalin awarded both Abel and Fisher the prestigious Red Star for self-denial and courage during combat. Like millions of other American GIs who faced death in battle, Paul rarely mentioned those years to anyone. "All we know," Anne said later, was that "he contracted malaria."

Peace meant a resumption of Fisher's intelligence career with a new mission already in the works. Abel, however, was not as fortunate. Even his wartime heroics and a new rank of colonel could not save him. Those suspicions about his

brother's "treason" never stopped dogging him. He had sacrificed so much for his country, yet as late as April 1945, the NKVD still viewed him as "trusted but not fully." A year later, at the age of 46, he was pensioned off as too old for continued service.

As for Captain Blasco, he reluctantly mustered out of the Marines, uncertain of what the future held. After what he had experienced, the return to civilian life was unsettling at first. So much so that he even considered rejoining the Corps for the discipline and comradeship that only a Marine could know. While pondering his future, the pull of athletics and a desire to give back brought him home to Harrisburg. Probably at the invitation of Father Lawrence Schott, CHS's principal, the former football star, college graduate and war hero rejoined the "Blue and Gold" gridgers, assisting Head Coach Ralph Farrina until he became an FBI Agent on February 17, 1947. From training school, Paul went to Johnson City, TN in the Knoxville Division before his transfer in May 1948 to the New York Office's Espionage Division, which was then awash in Russian spy investigations.

While Paul was honing his investigative skills in Tennessee, Fisher was in Moscow preparing for an assignment to the United States under the alias of Andrew Yurgesovich Kayotis. Born in Lithuania in 1895, the real Kayotis had immigrated to America as a child settling with his parents in Detroit, MI. The year that Blasco joined the Bureau, Kayotis, then 52 years old and unmarried, returned to Lithuania for a family visit, where he became ill and died in a local hospital. With Kayotis's valid American passport in hand, Fisher spent the next year absorbing the details of his new legend. Following a personal briefing from Soviet Foreign Minister Vyachislav Molotov, Fisher quietly slipped out of Moscow in October 1948 for a new life in the United States. Weeks later in New York City, he swapped his Kayotis passport for a new one under a different name. The Englishman turned Russian spy and war hero now became a retired American artist and photo-finisher named Emil Goldfus with his own studio, just blocks away from the U.S. Court House in Brooklyn.

Seventy years have passed since Fisher's arrest and more than a quarter century since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet even today, our understanding of his American espionage career remains sketchy. We know that he took control of the so-called "Volunteer" Agent network, led by American spy Morris Cohen and his wife, Lona. The Cohens' most important agent was Ted Hall, a young Harvard physics student who slipped top secret reports to the Russians on America's atomic bomb program, while working at the Manhattan Project's Los Alamos site. Later, with the FBI on their tail, Fisher helped smuggle the Cohens out of the U.S. through Mexico to Moscow. Evidence also points to



*Soviet intelligence officer Rudolf Abel on a 1990 USSR commemorative stamp*

his supplying funds to the wife of Julius Rosenberg's co-conspirator, Morton Sobell, then serving a 15-year prison sentence. Even after the Cold War ended, the SVR (KGB's successor agency) still lauded the Volunteer group's intelligence coup of "[guaranteeing] the transmittal to [Moscow] of super-secret information concerning the development of the American atomic bomb."

Life in New York for Paul was not all counterespionage. Five months after the June 1950 arrest of Julius Rosenberg, he married a Pennsylvania beauty in her twenties whom he met a few years earlier at the Hershey Park pool. She was Elizabeth Hren, the daughter of Marco G. Hren, owner of the M.G. Hren Dairy Farm in Steelton, PA.

The newlyweds' first home was a second-floor apartment in Englewood, NJ, which they had arranged through family friends in Harrisburg. Paul Jr. came along a year later. A second child, Anne, followed in 1955, the same year that Fisher secretly returned to Moscow for a visit with his wife and daughter. It was his first family reunion in seven years; it would be his last for another seven years. It was also the year that his best friend, Rudolf Abel passed away.

By 1957, the Englewood apartment had become so cramped that the couple took a plunge by purchasing their first home in a new Colonia, NJ sub-division about 30 miles south of New York. For the next several years, Paul and five of his neighbors, all FBI Agents, carpooled into Manhattan.

What neither the KGB nor the FBI knew was that hairline cracks had been forming in the carefully sculpted Goldfus cover beginning in 1952 with the arrival in the U.S. of Eugene Maki, Fisher's new assistant. Maki was, in fact, a 41-year-old Finn named Reino Häyhänen. The real Maki, born in Idaho in 1919, had returned to the Soviet Union with his Finnish parents when he was eight years old.

Born and raised in Leningrad, Häyhänen had studied Finnish in the hope of becoming a teacher. Later, he joined the Communist Party and fought on the Eastern Front before signing on as an officer with the NKVD. His language skills soon took him to Finland on a training assignment, where he abandoned his Russian wife for Hannah, a good looking, but heavy-drinking Finnish blond. Soon after his arrival in the U.S., she joined him. Their constant drinking and fighting would slowly doom Fisher.

The security nature of the Fisher/Häyhänen relationship was always paramount. For instance, two years elapsed before Häyhänen first met Fisher, whom he knew only as "Mark," and when they did briefly meet, it was usually in public places such as parks and restaurants. So, at first, Fisher had no way of knowing that his security was slowly collapsing. He knew nothing of the couple's increasingly violent and public rows, Häyhänen's failure to open a photo studio in Newark, NJ as ordered or, even worse, his pocketing

KGB operational funds. Catching on eventually, Fisher made the decision that would seal his fate.

Suddenly in the spring of 1957, Häyhänen received shocking orders from Moscow to return home where a promotion to the rank of lieutenant colonel and generous home leave awaited him. A week later he boarded a ship for Europe and arrived in Paris during the first week of May. Seven days at sea was enough to convince him that returning to Moscow was not an option. Häyhänen was a drunk and a crook — but he was no fool. He knew what his bosses had in mind. So without warning, one day he walked into the American embassy and proceeded to disgorge details about “Mark.”

It was Mother’s Day when Blasco, at home with his family, received an unexpected telephone call from the FBI Office. Together with a handful of Agents, he was soon hustling up to a house in Peekskill, NY to interview someone named Hannah Maki. After hours of questioning, the bewildered (and probably besotted) woman allowed the Agents to search her house. It was in a hole under the basement floor that Häyhänen’s treasure trove of espionage paraphernalia was discovered.

Over the next few weeks, Blasco struggled to identify Fisher. Häyhänen recalled little about him except that he posed as an artist and he had once visited his studio somewhere in Brooklyn. For seemingly days on end, Blasco and Häyhänen drove around until they hit pay dirt — a seven-story building at 252 Fulton Street in Brooklyn Heights. Known as the Ovington Studios, it was, in effect, an artist colony where painters and sculptors rented space.

Surveillance of Fisher’s suite quickly confirmed three things: the renter’s name was “Emil Goldfus,” the studio was always unoccupied and the Bureau had no idea where he resided. For the next several weeks, a look-out maintained a constant watch until one night around 10:30 a light was spotted. Agents cautiously followed Fisher on foot and subway which took them across the East River into Lower Manhattan, where they promptly lost him. Again the look-out was started with more weeks passing before the light went on again late one evening. This time, Fisher led Agents to the



Willie Fisher aka Rudolf Ivanovich Abel. Photo courtesy of fbi.gov

Hotel Latham on East 28th, where he was registered as Martin Collins in Room 839.

Blasco had few options available to him. The evidence of espionage found in the Peekskill house was insufficient to link Fisher to Häyhänen. Then there was the instability of Häyhänen and his wife. Both, now having been moved by the FBI to a New York City hotel

room for security and ease of questioning, became difficult handling problems. Their constant drinking and fighting was now aggravated by Häyhänen’s defection-induced stress, the couple’s complete control by the FBI and his refusal to testify in open court for fear of a KGB assassin’s bullet.

The American and the Englishman finally met at 7 am on June 21, 1957. When Blasco knocked on the door of Room 839, a skinny naked man in his mid-50s answered. Pushing his way inside, Paul took control — first identifying himself, ordering him to dress and seating him on the bed.

Addressing him as “Colonel,” Paul explained that he wished to discuss a “matter involving the internal security of the United States” and was seeking the cooperation of the man he knew only as “Mark,” or “Martin Collins” or “Emil Goldfus.” Fisher never uttered a

word. He simply stared at the floor while keeping up a steely composure.

Thirty minutes of deathly silence later, Blasco turned Fisher over to waiting INS Agents as planned. Charged as an illegal alien under a civil warrant which required no immediate appearance before a federal magistrate, Mark was hustled to a waiting plane at Newark airport for a direct flight to an immigration detention facility in McAllen, TX. The INS’ search of Room 839 which followed produced a wealth of espionage evidence along with cash and bank records totaling more than \$22,000 (\$194,000 in 2017 value).

Just days later, Blasco followed Mark to Texas. There in a make-shift tent with temperatures soaring into the upper 90s, Paul continuously interrogated him for three weeks. Decades later, Anne still remembered her dad describing Fisher as sitting in complete silence, not even bothering to swat away the flies that continually landed on his sweaty face. FBI Agent Ed Gamber, Blasco’s partner in the interrogations, also recalled him. In a 2009 interview for the Society’s Oral History Heritage Program Gamber called him a gentleman, a “nice guy” who was always polite “except when you asked him about the KGB.”

The theater of lies, so ingrained in Fisher, had one final act to play out. Just days into his questioning, he suddenly made a startling admission. Yes, he had entered the U.S. illegally using a forged American passport purchased with a cache of dollars that he had discovered in a blockhouse in Russia. Emil Goldfus and Martin Collins were not real names, he said. “My name is Rudolf Ivanovich Abel.” For decades to come, the world would know the Cold War’s most famous “Master Spy” under the name of Fisher’s deceased friend.



Blasco 1955

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Six weeks later, Willy Fisher, now calling himself Rudolf Abel, was returned to New York for trial on espionage charges. On October 25, 1957, a Brooklyn jury convicted him. Three weeks later, he escaped the death penalty when Judge Mortimer Byers handed down a 30-year prison sentence.

Two years later, as Fisher sat in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, his attorney, James B. Donovan, pleaded his case before the Supreme Court by accusing Blasco of engaging in a subterfuge. Donovan, a Brooklyn lawyer, former Office of Strategic Services General Counsel and member of the Nuremberg war crimes prosecution team, argued that because Paul had no case against his client, he used the INS Agents as “pawns” to arrest him as an illegal alien in order to search his room and gain valuable time for continued questioning.

On March 25, 1960, 38 days before U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Francis Gary Powers took-off from Pakistan on his ill-fated U2 flight over the Soviet Union, the Supreme Court affirmed Fisher’s conviction. Writing for the majority, Justice Felix Frankfurter rejected Donovan’s argument. “At worst,” Frankfurter noted, “it may be said that the circumstances of this case may reveal an opportunity for administrative abuse. But to hold illegitimate, in the absence of bad faith the cooperation between INS and FBI, would be to ignore the scope of rightful cooperation between two branches of a single Department of Justice concerned with the enforcement of different areas of law under the common authority of the Attorney General.”

As they say “the rest is history.” But in this case — important history. Willy Fisher appearing “slim, thin and suddenly old,” according to Donovan, walked slowly across the Glienicke Bridge separating West and East Berlin in exchange for Francis Gary Powers. **(This spy exchange is the subject of the 2015 historical drama legal thriller *Bridge of Spies*, starring Tom Hanks and co-starring Mark Rylance, who won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Rudolph Abel.)** The time was 8:45 am on February 10, 1962: fifteen years after he first arrived in the United States. This first exchange would set the pattern for future spy trades until the end of the Cold War.

William August Fisher had been reunited with Elena and Evelyn barely ten years before he died on November 15, 1971. After more than a decade of denying any connection with him, the KGB wasted no time exploiting his death as they did his life by putting on a funeral befitting a Chekist hero. Before his cremation and burial in Moscow’s Donskai Cemetery, the body of “Rudolf Abel” lay in state for days in the KGB Hall of Honor near their Lubyanka headquarters. As Fisher’s biographer later noted, “Rudolf [Abel] had been used in death and even now could not rest in peace as he and Willy were used again, together.”

By then Paul had been in the Newark Division for more than ten years. As a newly transferred Supervisor to the counterintelligence squad, Don Pettis vividly remembered him as a “super dedicated Agent” and a trusted counsellor, a humble man and a true gentleman. He was a mentor and educator, Pettis recalled, always willing to pass along a storehouse of knowledge not only to his “new boss” but to the many Agents who found themselves lucky enough to enter Paul’s orbit.

After 30 years of service, FBI Special Agent Paul James Blasco retired on December 30, 1977. Like many new retirees, he joined the Society and then floundered a bit until a friend introduced him to golf. A new passion was born, one that would consume the rest of his life.

The Blascos continued to live in their Colonia home until the morning of July 22, 2009, when Paul suffered a debilitating stroke. Elizabeth, his bride of fifty-eight years, died that same afternoon. Paul passed away nine days later. Harrisburg’s pride and joy was 88 years old.

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Circa 1946-1947) Photo of the football dinner. Blasco is assistant football coach seated at extreme right