

# The Odds on Spyhunting

by PAUL KEARNEY

*Imaginative citizens give the FBI plenty of laughs, plenty of exercise  
—and also some mighty hot tips!*



**EDITORS' NOTE:** *If you are one of the 390,805 citizens who last year gave security tips to the FBI, don't be discouraged if the persons you believed guilty weren't in jail within the week. Even if your lead wasn't as peculiar as some of those recounted here, there is one thing to bear in mind: in good counter-espionage work, an arrest is the last resort—not the prime objective. It is important, particularly, to “tail” people month after month, rather than to make a quick arrest. You meet such interesting people! Incidentally, another tip from the FBI is: always report all suspicious circumstances immediately to the FBI without any amateur investigation or vigilante activity first.*

**M**Y WIFE AND I operate a small resort in the Catskills called Watson Hollow Inn (adv.). As a writer, I have had contacts with the FBI for years, periodically visiting them to get material for articles.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, at learning that I had been turned in to the FBI as a suspected Nazi spy by a Swedish cook who had departed from our midst in a blaze of profanity if not glory. The report stated “that we had swastikas all over the place; that the

proprietor would go away for hours at a time with a movie camera; that he had a strange telegraphic machine in his room.”

Since I'm an amateur movie fan, her second charge was correct. The “strange telegraphic machine” was my film splicer on which she had seen me working late at night. And the swastikas? Well, 20 years ago a previous operator of the inn had several thousand postcards printed by a concern whose trademark was the then perfectly respectable Indian symbol. We had found two boxes of the cards in the attic and were using them, being careful to clip the swastikas off the corners. And that was the low-down on a spyhunt!

As you may surmise, a staggering proportion of other espionage tips from the public have just as flimsy a foundation in fact. In the past fiscal year alone a total of 390,805 security matters were reported to the FBI for investigation—on top of 218,734 for

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the previous year. Despite the discouraging preponderance of chaff in this yield, the bureau checks on every reasonable one, with its own field men or through local peace officers.

The G-Men are gluttons for punishment. Yet every so often that vigilance pays off handsomely. One night, for example, a New York hotel manager reported that an agitated stranger had instructed the room clerk to keep close watch upon one of the occupied rooms. The watch was to continue until further notice.

The manager had nothing tangible to go on, but the thing made him suspicious and he called the G-Men over. Working back from the guest's name, they found that he had been hit by a taxi two nights before and had died. With him at the time had been a man who had grabbed his injured companion's brief case and fled.

That seemed odd. So also did the fact that the unclaimed body was finally buried by the Spanish Consulate. And, to make a long story short, this was the first break in the Kurt Frederick Ludwig case which culminated in the sentencing of that Nazi and eight of his fellow spies to a total of 132 years in prison.

At the same time, there was the case of the citizen who picked up a small notebook in a New York telephone booth. He couldn't make much out of it, but turned it over to the G-Men. Thanks to his hunch, that notebook proved to be the missing link in the identification of one "Robert," of the aforementioned Ludwig ring, as Paul Borchardt, Nazi agent. Herr Borchardt is now in jail.

Sadly enough, however, few hunches are as productive as that one proved to be. Recently, a correspondent, identifying herself only as "Secret Operator K," wrote the Boston Field

Office this description of a man who had aroused her suspicions on Harvard Square:

"He was wearing a black toupee but I could see white hair underneath. He also wore a small goatee. He had on a khaki jacket with reddish brown buttons and a lot of overcasting on the upper part of the cuffs and pockets. He had three rings on one hand. I had some hard work to get the details as he seemed very keen. He wore a light blue shirt and a tie with red and light gray diagonal stripes. Perhaps he was just an innocent professor, but I suspected him on account of the goatee and the haircut."

Obviously, the tip-off on that gal was the mystery thriller signature, "Secret Operator K." Many others who like to play G-Man reveal their psychopathic bent simply by their own outlandish statements.

WHEN THE *S. S. Siboney* docked here in the spring of 1941, one of the passengers was a crack Nazi spy coming in from Germany. An alert citizen on board had become suspicious of this very individual and took pains to convey his suspicions to the FBI. As a consequence, an investigation was launched which continued for several months, resulting in the arrest and conviction of Ernst Fritz Lehmitz who is today serving 30 years in prison.

No matter how small the ratio may be, it is the presence of leads like these among the potpourri of honest mistakes, false conclusions and lurid imaginings which compels the harried FBI men to weigh and evaluate every tip they get.

In Salt Lake City a young man reported that when he investigated a strange noise in the kitchen one night, he had been knocked out before he could turn on the light.

Coming to shortly, he found a man kneeling over him, branding his chest with a knife. He lost consciousness again. When he revived he discovered that a swastika had been burned on his chest. A card had been left on the floor on which was scrawled in red crayon, "This is just a sample of what all Americans will get."

He actually did have a crude swastika on his chest and a slight burn on his cheek. But under skillful questioning, the lad finally broke down and confessed that he had staged the show himself for dramatic effect!

Likewise around New England a number of letters were picked up, addressed to various members of the German nobility, containing information on the P-38 pursuit ship and concluding with the hope that "I shall see you after the war." Diligent sleuthing finally revealed the letter-writer to be a 13-year-old kid with an over-sized theatrical sense, amusing himself by writing to people whose names he had gleaned from Count Luckner's book, *The Sea Devil*.

Rumors, of course, are always with us. Last summer there were widespread reports through Maryland that parachutists had been seen landing on various farms. All the stories stemmed from a farmer's seeing a man walking across his land with a flour sack over his back. The farmer told his landlord, adding that the sack looked like a parachute. The landlord notified the authorities that a man carrying a parachute had been seen on the place—and the tale went on from there, losing nothing in the process. Thus do folks with loose tongues and looser minds make a lot of needless trouble for our over-worked authorities.

Others who add to the burden—but in a much more legitimate way—are people who stumble across "clues" which seem suspicious to them. In

which seem suspicious to them. In Seattle, a traveler stopping at a tourist cabin found a strange map in the bed, full of mysterious green dots and lines. Concluding that it had been lost by a foreign agent, he turned it in to the FBI. Actually, it was a gauging station map used by a geologist.

Chief among those who bring gray hair to the FBI men are citizens who are forever stumbling into mysterious "code messages." In Iowa a woman reported that from her bathroom window she could hear a voice which was obviously transmitting some kind of code. She jotted down what she could hear: "O-61, B-58, N-34, G-31," and so on. The voice would then say, "That's all." Presently it would start off again on another cipher message.

Did you guess it? Yes, it was a Bingo game several doors away!

In Michigan the "flashing of Morse Code messages" from a neighboring house turned out to be merely the movements of various members of a family passing back and forth in front of some Christmas decorations. In Washington an urgent report of a "telegraph key" in the apartment below proved to be an ambitious girl studying typing at home.

But the alpha and omega of all code leads was the following one from a Gulf Coast town. A resident of an outlying district reported to the police that a foreign radio operator was constantly tapping out a cipher—possibly data to enemy subs off the coast.

Carefully circling the area and listening at several points, the police finally determined that the clicking noise came from a garage-apartment into which a young couple with a strange car and out-of-state license plates had recently moved.

Through all this stealthy gum-shoeing around in the dark, the mysterious operator continued to work his key—

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which was fine; they'd nail him in the act. Surrounding the house completely, a squad of men slipped into the high grass of a large field in the rear, creeping forward quietly. As they neared the house, the noise drew them away from the garage toward the center of the field. Circling it, they closed in toward a small clearing until finally the leader could part the grasses and actually see their "enemy agent" at work.

It was a huge frog sitting on a clump of moist earth, doubtless talking wolf talk to the ladies.

Surely, it sounds ludicrous in the cold light of day, but just give the human mind a false premise and a little imagination, and anything at all can happen.

It's EASY to laugh off one like that. In fact, it would be easy to laugh off most of them when they're pouring in at the rate of better than a thousand a day. But the FBI men don't work that way. They can regale you with hundreds upon hundreds of fruitless tips, but a lead is a lead to them and they listen patiently to all and sundry. Often the screwballs and the cranks are self-evident—but you can't always tell. If you were an FBI agent, for example, what would you think of a German-born, naturalized American who quit a job in the Consolidated Aircraft plant in 1939 to return to Germany on a visit and suddenly came to you with this tale:

On his very first morning in Germany a Gestapo man visited him at his hotel, proposed that he enroll in

the famous espionage school in Hamburg and, after a suitable course, that he return to the United States, amply provided with funds, to set up a short-wave radio station which would serve as a communications post for numerous Nazi agents in the Americas. The Gestapo man had casually mentioned certain unpleasant things which might happen to his relatives in Germany if he didn't comply. He was in a tough spot—what should he do?

Frankly, if the man had come to me with that hildish story, I would have suggested that he commit himself to a nice, quiet asylum somewhere. But that isn't what the FBI did. Instead, they investigated him and his story, as only they can, and found it to be strictly on the level. They told him to go through with the deal, which he did. A "secret" Nazi short-wave station was set up on Long Island, operated by alternating shifts of FBI agents who, in 11 months, transmitted about 461 cipher messages to station AOR in Bremen—all cleared through the Army, the Navy and other interested agencies first. And, to summarize in a few words a case report which runs to 300 volumes, each two inches thick, not only were 33 Nazi agents imprisoned here as a result of this one highly implausible looking lead—but several of the 8,200 enemy aliens picked up soon after the war broke can credit their confinement to this aircraft worker who went back to Germany on a visit in 1939.

No wonder the FBI harps on "the importance of the intelligent citizen's reporting all logical information and letting us be the judge of its value!"

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