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RUDOLF ABEL AS A RELUCTANT CELEBRITY**Vin Arthey**

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Abstract. C. Rojek’s “Celebrity” (2010) is a seminal text for those studying aspects of celebrity. At the outset, Rojek states that he intends ‘to treat celebrity as the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere’ or the ‘impact on public consciousness’ and then sets out a series of headings under which he intends to discuss his analysis: celebrity which is ascribed, achieved or attributed. This article notes that Rojek’s examples are from the English speaking world, specifically the United Kingdom and the United States, and his evidence mediated through the culture and media of these countries. It then muses over the extent to which this approach is relevant to the Russian experience. The bulk of the article is devoted to a case study of the KGB officer and ‘illegal’ spy William A. Fisher who was arrested in New York in 1957, jailed, and exchanged for the US ‘spy pilot’ F. Gary Powers in 1962. By definition, spying is secret and celebrity is public. It is argued that the social and political systems in both the USA and the USSR in the mid-Cold War period contrived to make this Colonel Fisher a celebrity in the sense of his ‘impact on public consciousness,’ but also that Fisher’s celebrity status does not quite fit Rojek’s taxonomy. The article observes that Fisher was ‘a reluctant celebrity’: a status that is neither ‘achieved’ nor ‘attributed’ in Rojek’s categorization, or a status that could be both. Either way, Fisher’s celebrity needs a new term for its description.

Key words: Rudolph Abel, reluctant celebrity, Cold War, representation of spies.

In the opening chapter of his “Celebrity” (2001), Chris Rojek states that he intends to ‘treat celebrity as the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere’ or the ‘impact on public consciousness’. The chapter then provides what is in effect a taxonomy, indeed a useful taxonomy, so we are invited to see celebrity status as ‘ascribed’ (pre-determined by biological descent), ‘achieved’ (by personal accomplishment) or ‘attributed’ (presented as such by cultural intermediaries). Rojek then discusses *types* of attributed celebrity, and concludes his chapter by outlining his three approaches to the understanding of celebrity [Rojek: 9–49].¹

Russian readers will find this book of interest, but will note that the approach is very much not only of the ‘Western’, but of the English-speaking world, with examples almost exclusively from the United Kingdom and the United States. Rojek shows how the English-speaking mass media creates, sustains and disposes of ‘celebrity’. There are of course similarities in the Russian experience of ‘celebrity awareness’ and creation – political personalities, military heroes, ‘stars’ from the worlds of culture and entertainment, sportspeople, cosmonauts, characters from popular drama and the actors who portray them, and so on – but it would be a mistake to regard

these experiences as identical in the two cultures. Furthermore, specific Russian perspectives must take into account pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet experiences.

So, to take a particular case: speak to many Russians in their 60s or 70s, particularly those from Moscow, or St Petersburg, and there is a very good chance that they will recall a visit to their school during the mid-1960s by Colonel Rudolf Ivanovich Abel. This Colonel Abel was a celebrity, but a most unlikely and unusual celebrity because he was, or had been, a spy, and a member of that most secret group of spies during the Soviet era, the Illegals, spies who were given false names and identities and infiltrated into countries overseas. They were not declared as intelligence officers, accredited members of Soviet embassy or consular staff, but operated covertly as nationals in those countries. They knew that if they were captured they would be on their own, that their government would not acknowledge them, and that they would face the full rigour of that country’s law, including the risk of execution. This Colonel Abel, given the codename Arach, entered the United States, the country the Soviet Union referred to as ‘The Main Adversary’, in 1947 and carried out his work for ten years until he was betrayed by a member of his team. He was arrested in New York, tried,

¹ These approaches Rojek proposes to use for the rest of his book, “Subjectivism, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism”, are not germane to this article. The author is grateful to Annisa Suliman of Leeds Beckett University for drawing his attention to this source.

found guilty and imprisoned for thirty years, effectively a life sentence for a man of 54, but in the early 1960s an opportunity for an exchange of spies emerged, and Colonel Abel returned to Moscow in February 1962. So, this Colonel Abel came home known as a spy who had been captured and imprisoned as a spy in the country where he was operating. He was, then, a failed spy. The very nature of spying demands that it must be secret, but not only did Abel's role and his failure become public, but the man became a celebrity. Celebrity is the antithesis of 'unknown', which is what a spy must be.

To understand something of this conundrum we need to go back into history, and into biography. The man the world knows as Rudolf Ivanovich Abel was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in the North East of England on July 11, 1903, with the name William August Fischer. His father was Heinrich Matthaus Fischer [Saunders] and his mother Lyubov Vasilyevna Gidova. Heinrich Fischer was an ethnic German born in Russia in 1871. As a young, politically active engineer in St Petersburg in the early 1890s, Heinrich became politically active in groups led by V.I. Lenin. He was arrested and sentenced to periods of internal exile and later, as a young married man, to avoid deportation to Germany and the risk of conscription into the German army, he and his

newly pregnant wife travelled across Europe and the North Sea to Newcastle where Heinrich understood he could find work. Fischer remained politically active in Newcastle, posting copies of Lenin's *Iskra* (which had been printed in London) to addresses in Russia, founding the British branch of the *Rossiiskaya Sotsial Demokraticheskaya Rabochaya Partiya (RSDRP)* and later smuggling ammunition to Russian revolutionaries after the abortive revolution of 1907. He was a founder member of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 and, when it was clear Bolshevism was triumphing and that a Soviet Union was being established, in the summer of 1921 he and his family set off for Moscow: he and his wife were returning to Russia, but although the seventeen-year-old William was a Marxist committed to Bolshevism, he was about to set foot in Russia for the first time.

William became a Komsomol activist, served his time in the Red Army (specialising in radio work) and then at 23 he was recruited into the foreign intelligence section of the *Ob'yedinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie (OGPU)*.¹ His Party credentials, his radio operating skills and his facility with languages made him an ideal candidate for this foreign intelligence work. (He had learned Russian from his mother, German from his father, his own native

¹ There are several biographical works on the life and work of Colonel William Fisher in English and in Russian. My own study has been published in three editions: [Arthey 2005; Arthey 2011; Arthey 2015]. These works all contain comprehensive bibliographies, including references to magazine and newspaper articles. See also: [Tarasov] and [Dolgopolov].

language was English, and he had learned French and Latin at his high school in England.)

After service as an Illegal in Oslo, Ostend and London in the 1930s, as head of the (then) *Narodny Komisariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD)* training school for Illegal radio operators in Moscow, a distinguished record in the 1941–45 war (he was the senior radio operator in ‘Operation Monastery’ and in the secret Belorussian deception campaign, ‘Operation Berezino’), he received extended training prior to a new mission. In 1947, he was sent to the United States to be the Illegal *rezident* in New York with the initial task of reviving agents and spy rings which had become dormant during the war. From his radio centre (which would be moved on a regular basis) he would receive and then deliver orders for these agents and was responsible for the funds to pay these people. He would also be establishing a contact and payment network for agents from across the world who were posted to or would be working out of the United Nations Headquarters in New York City.

For his life in the United States he was given the name Emil Goldfus and was to pose as a sometime photographic technician who had taken up drawing and painting in his semi-retirement and gain access to a community of young, free-thinking artists in Brooklyn, New York. The work was arduous, and after the Stalin’s death in 1953 and Beria’s execution the Soviet Union’s foreign intelligence service was in a state of some confusion. Fisher was sent a sup-

port officer, Reino Hayhanen, but this created more problems as the man was not suited to the work. In June 1955, the now Colonel Fisher returned to Moscow for a six-month vacation and further briefing, but when he returned to New York he discovered that his assistant was drinking heavily, had failed to improve his speaking of English and had almost certainly misappropriated \$5000 that should have been used to pay agents. However, it was to be well over a year before Hayhanen was recalled, and when this did happen disaster finally struck. When he was *en route* to Moscow, breaking his journey in Paris, the ineffectual and probably criminal assistant went to the United States embassy, and defected. Hayhanen was brought back to New York and from the haphazard information that he gave the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Fisher’s art studio was found and from there Fisher was followed to one of his apartments, where he was arrested on 20 June 1957.

The outcome of this arrest and the trial that followed takes us to the unravelling of complex notions of concealment and discovery, secrecy and openness, obscurity and celebrity. During and after the raid on Fisher’s apartment and studio, events moved swiftly. The first law enforcement officers to enter Fisher’s apartment were FBI men, to whom Fisher said nothing. Then officers of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) entered the room and when Fisher identified himself as ‘Martin Collins’, another alias, they arrested him



Pic. 1. Abel during 1957 trial

for violation of immigration laws. After Fisher was taken into custody the INS and FBI officers searched the apartment and found radio receiving equipment, cameras, film stock, code pads, bolts and pencils hollowed out for the concealment of messages – all paraphernalia one would expect a spy to possess. Fisher was transferred immediately to the McAllen Alien Detention Facility in Texas where he told his captors that his name was Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, and this was the name that he became known by in the United States, indeed, the name that was used for him for the rest of his life. He was brought back to Brooklyn, (close to his studio) for his trial which began in October 1957, and the court asked the

New York Bar Association to provide him with a Defence Attorney. The lawyer chosen was James B. Donovan who specialised in insurance law, but who had been a member of the Office of Strategic Services (the Second World War forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)) and an attorney for the prosecution at the Nuremberg War Crime Trials. These factors were relevant in establishing a perspective of celebrity on the court case, but not the only factor because the accused had drawn attention to himself in unusual ways before and during the trial.

As already stated, this arrest indicated failure on the part of the unfortunate spy Colonel Abel and when he was being taken to and from court he was obviously going to be the subject of intense public and press interest. However, instead of keeping his head down, his face as far away as possible from the view of press, TV and newsreel cameras, he held his shoulders back, his head up, kept his eyes wide open: if not looking directly at the cameras he was making sure that his facial features were clearly identifiable (pic. 1).

Certainly his captors were ‘parading’ him, but there was no attempt on his part to hide himself at all. It was as if everyone, captors and captive, wanted this man to be seen. Then, during the trial itself, it became clear that Defence Attorney Donovan had a high regard for the professionalism of his client.¹ This did not have to be the

¹ See [Donovan] and [Bernikow]. Also, the feature film *Bridge of Spies* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2015) starring Tom Hanks as James B. Donovan and Mark Rylance as Rudolf Abel.

case. Donovan had not sought the work, he had been asked to take it on, but his defence was astute: the evidence that Abel was a spy was overwhelming, so the attorney did not put his client on the stand to be cross-examined. The key to the defence was that the State had contravened Abel's rights under the Constitution of the United States: Donovan argued that the searches of the studio and the apartment were unconstitutional and that the evidence thereby gained was inadmissible. The prosecution did of course bring witnesses to the stand, including Abel's now-defected assistant Reino Hayhanen and a US Army sergeant who was a sometime agent for Soviet intelligence and whose name had been found on a note in Hayhanen's possession. In his cross-examining, Donovan could show that both these men were inept and dishonourable, and in so doing was able to show that his client was an honourable man. This was emphasised later in the trial when the prosecution read to the court an excerpt of a microfilmed letter sent from 'Abel's' daughter in Moscow which referred to her father's visit home in 1955. As this letter was permitted as evidence, Donovan took the opportunity to present other microfilmed letters found in the apartment, including a letter from 'Abel's' wife telling him about her health and asking about his. A journalist in court noted that the spy's 'face grew red and his sharp, deep-set eyes filled with tears,' and that women jurors had tears in their eyes [Donovan: 214].

The Colonel's personality and bravery were

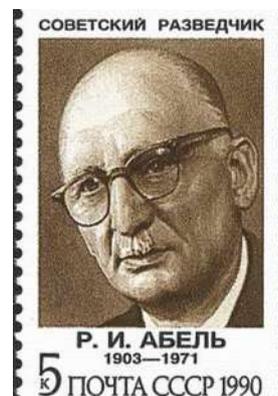
noted by other Americans too. One of his interrogators said, 'We tried to break him, but we didn't. You had to admire him.' [Arthey 2015: 170] When he was on remand, he started to teach French to one of his cellmates, and later he designed and printed his prison's Christmas cards. [ibid.: 179] However, none of this should suggest that this 'Abel' was seen as some sort of hero by the American public, and it must be said that Donovan failed too. The lawyer and his family experienced threats because he was 'defending a communist,' and 'Abel' was found guilty and sentenced a long term of imprisonment. Donovan had been successful with his argument against the death penalty for 'Abel' and fought the case to the Supreme Court of the United States where he lost, but only by one vote. Donovan was convinced that with 'Abel' the USA had a 'bargaining chip' should it ever come to pass that the USSR captured an American espionage professional, and so it was. At Berlin's Glienicke Bridge in February 1962 'Colonel Rudolf Ivanovich Abel' was exchanged for US pilot Francis Gary Powers whose high-altitude U-2 spy plane had been shot down over Sverdlovsk in May 1960. Again, 'Abel's' celebrity and the importance of the occasion was underlined by the fact that the Deputy Director of United States Prisons accompanied the prisoner to Germany and to the exchange [Donovan: 417].

The way 'Abel' and Donovan conducted themselves had been admired by the espionage communities in the USA and the USSR, and the



Pic. 2. Mark Rylance as Abel in Spielberg's film "Bridge of Spies" (2015)

celebrity they had acquired stayed with them.¹ (Pic. 2) James Donovan negotiated the release of more than 9000 Cuban detainees after the failed American instigated invasion of Cuba in 1962 and also that year ran as candidate for the United States Senate. Although Colonel William Fisher returned to intelligence work in Moscow, his five years of imprisonment and interrogation in the United States meant that his operational career was over, however his profile was such that he was an asset for the Soviet intelligence community to make use of. He had a consultancy role on United States issues, gave intelligence briefings in Warsaw Pact countries and toured schools and *Komsomol* groups. He featured on postage



Pic. 3. Stamp with Abel's image

stamps (pic. 3) and his celebrity was confirmed when he introduced Savva Kulish's 1968 film *Mertvyi Sezon*. But it is clear that our man 'Abel' was not comfortable as he gave this introduction. Although he speaks clearly, he seems to be embarrassed and he is looking down, not up (pic. 4). The difference between this image and the New York trial images is striking.

To unpack this contrast, it is necessary to go back to William Fisher's Moscow briefing in 1955. Fisher was worried about his new assistant Hayhanen and that the man's incompetence might lead to the capture of one or both of them. He discussed this with his senior officer General Sergei A. Kondrashev, and it was decided that if

¹ James B. Donovan is seen as a great "Cold War hero" in the United States, and this is evidenced by the production and commercial success of the film *Bridge of Spies* (see [Arthey 2015: 170]).



Fig. 4. Introductory monologue of Abel in Savva Kulish's film *Mertvyi Sezon* (1968)

he should be captured, he would give the name Rudolf I. Abel to his captors.¹ This choice of name was significant in two respects. Firstly, not only was Rudolf Ivanovich William Fisher's best friend, but the two men were fellow radio operators and had worked together teaching radio techniques at the NKVD training school in the 1930s and early 1940s. It was said that they were always together, that they operated like a comedy double-act, to the extent that sometimes, senior officers would address them with the other's name, or refer to them with both names – 'AbelFisher' or 'FisherAbel'. Then, when he was captured, Fisher realised that even under arrest he could put an intelligence plan into action.

Here again, it is necessary to go back in histo-

ry, to the 1930s, when radio men William A. Fisher and Rudolf I. Abel worked together in Soviet Foreign Intelligence, and became close friends. For a few months in the 1930s, when he had been an Illegal radio operator in London, Fisher's senior officer, the Illegal *rezident*, had been 'Alexander Orlov', (real name Leiba L. Fel'dbin) whose codename was 'Schwed'.² In 1936 Stalin sent Orlov to Spain to be the Soviet Politburo adviser to the Popular Front Government but, fearing for his life in 1938 when he was recalled to Moscow, Orlov fled to the United States. However, before he went to ground, he compiled a list of Stalin's crimes which he sent with a covering letter to J.V. Stalin himself (together with a copy to Head of the NKVD, N.I. Yezhov). The letter informed Stalin that a copy of the correspondence had been deposited with a United States lawyer and, should any member of his, Orlov's, family come to any harm, the lawyer would publish this account immediately. Nothing more was heard of Orlov until after Stalin's death in 1953, and then Orlov did publish his book, *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes*. The Soviet intelligence service, now the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti* (KGB) was still reeling from Beria's death but when Orlov surfaced they knew they had to act. It was obvious that Orlov was now being debriefed by the FBI, and the KGB knew that Orlov held many deep intelligence secrets, like the existence

¹ Interview with Sergei A. Kondrashev, Moscow, April 2003.

² For Orlov's full story see [Costello & Tsarev].

of the ‘Cambridge Five’ group in the UK. One of the tasks given to Fisher when he returned to the USA in 1955 was ‘to test the Swede.’ Fisher’s arrest was a disaster, but it gave him an opportunity. Orlov knew both Fisher and Abel. Would he tell the FBI that the man they had was Fisher, not Abel? More seriously, what other secrets might he reveal or had he revealed? Orlov was indeed questioned about the captive Abel, and when shown the press photographs and newsreel footage of Fisher said that ‘he’d seen the man at the Lubyanka, but didn’t know his name’ [Costello & Tsarev: 372]. As always with espionage, there were other checks, and in this case the key check was whether Orlov was revealing anything about the Cambridge Five in the UK. When nothing happened, the KGB concluded that Orlov’s had not been a true defection or at least that they could rely on his silence on these matters.

On his return to the USSR, this job done, and the positive image of ‘the Chekist’ that Fisher presented to the world, the KGB realised they had an opportunity to present Fisher, as Rudolf I. Abel, as a role model, *homo sovieticus*, a celebrity, to the Soviet public and to Warsaw Pact allies. But there was a price that William A. Fisher had to pay. What he did not know was that his best friend, Rudolf I. Abel, had died of a heart attack, quite suddenly, and quite soon after he returned to the USA in late 1955. “If I had known that Rudolf was dead,” Fisher said later, “I would nev-

er have used his name.” [Arthey 2015: 188] But of course, there was no way that Fisher could revert to his own name, and senior colleagues still confused the two, ‘Fisher/Abel.’ [Sudoplatov: 109] At home, this was the heaviest burden Fisher had to bear and he became depressed. At the office, because of his imprisonment and his interrogations, he was never fully trusted again. When he died, from cancer of the lung, in November 1971, the authorities wished to have him buried at the Novodevichy Cemetery, but this would have been under the name Rudolf I. Abel (the real Abel had been buried in Moscow’s German Cemetery in 1955), and Fisher’s widow Yelena was adamant that he should be buried under his own name, so his funeral and interment was private, at the Donskoi Cemetery. The short period of celebrity was over and the veil of secrecy fell once more.

Returning to Rojek’s introduction to his *Celebrity* (London, 2010), it is interesting to see how he explores the derivation of the word ‘celebrity’ [Rojek: 9], noting how the word comes from notions of ‘the fall of the gods’ and the rise of new forms of democratic governments and secular societies. The ‘celebrification’ of ‘Abel’ in the United States happened in a post-World War, early Cold War period when the role of newspapers and cinema newsreel was being challenged by television news. Each of these media responded to the publicity surrounding the case, and

the authorities connived in this, as the United States had no experience in dealing with ‘illegal spies’. As well as Fisher wanting to be seen, to ‘test Schwed’, his captors wanted him to be seen, too: they wanted to garner as much information as possible about this man. But Fisher’s ‘self-revelation’ and the FBI’s and the media’s ‘showing’ created an image in the USA, that Rojek would define as ‘celebrity’.

Once Fisher was in prison the image faded, but the situation changed when Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union and the opportunity for a trade became possible. Although the negotiations were conducted in secret, once the exchange had taken place both men could reappear in the public eye, their notoriety or celebrity reconfigured. The American public was ambivalent about Powers (why had he allowed himself to be captured?) and back in the USA he eventually retreated into obscurity as a test pilot and then as a helicopter pilot for a Los Angeles radio station. But on his return in 1962, Fisher found himself in a Soviet Union that was very different from the one he had effectively left in 1947, a Soviet Union under Khrushchev which was different from a Soviet Union under Stalin, and in

a KGB that was very different from the NKVD.

True, Fisher was distinguished in his social network [ibid.: 12]¹, intelligence officers in both the USA and the Soviet Union spoke and continue to speak of him in the highest regard² so in a term that Rojek also uses he is ‘renowned’ as well as being a celebrity. Staying with Rojek we might say that Fisher’s celebrity was ‘attributed’, rather than ‘achieved’: no personal accomplishment, talent or skill could be deduced from the Fisher’s image as observed in the United States. However, his image there could be said to show the man as ‘noteworthy and exceptional’, and this was certainly the case in the Soviet Union after 1962 [Rojek: 18]. But, ultimately, we must return to the man himself. He was reserved; he was a spy; he had to become public; he took on his friend’s name, and when he knew that his friend was dead, believed that he had betrayed him. There is always a split between the public self and the private self [ibid.: 11], particularly for a celebrity, but for Fisher this split became irrevocable and unbearable. Perhaps we can add another heading to Rojek’s taxonomy, between *achieved* and *attributed* celebrity, William A. Fisher is the definition of *reluctant* celebrity.

¹ See also [Arthey 2015: 170]. Also, the eulogy from ‘A Group of Comrades’, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Moscow, 17 November 1971, quoted in Arthey, *Abel*, pp. 195–6.

² This image is also apparent in the films *Mertvyi Sezon* and *Bridge of Spies*.

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