

Major Choynecki's Ace

The solution to an old puzzle of wartime intelligence.

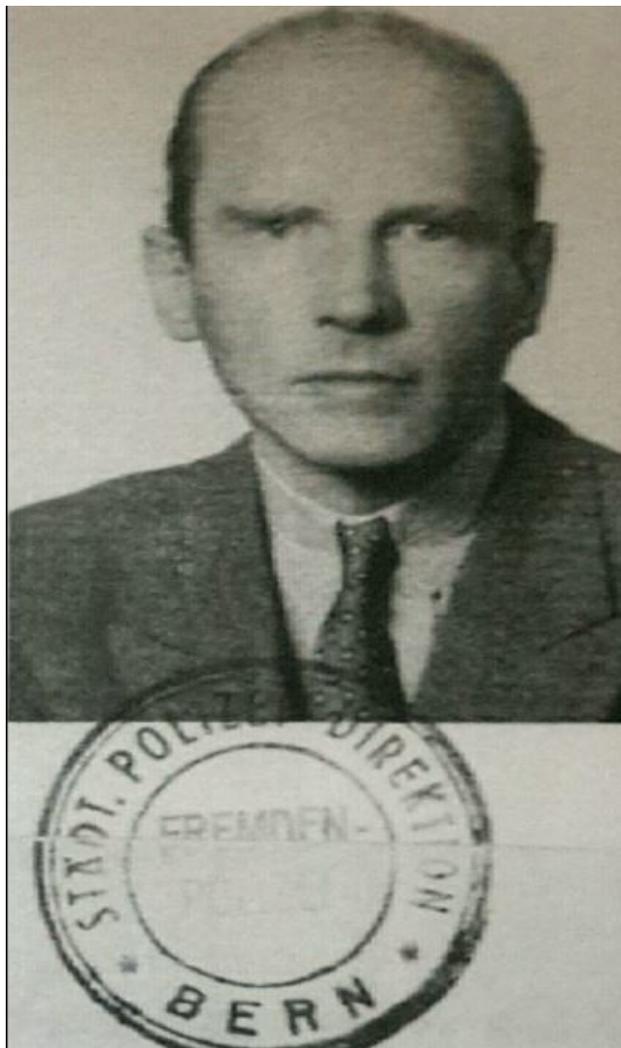
C.G.McKay

On 5 September 1939, an oval- faced man with grey-green eyes, a pale complexion and a scar on his left wrist, entered Switzerland. His name was Szczesny Jacek Choynecki. The following month he would celebrate his thirty- seventh birthday and he had come to Switzerland to serve as Polish Vice-Consul in Berne. But titles can be misleading. Far from being a minor drudge who had somehow fastened on the lower rungs of the diplomatic ladder, Choynecki was a highly experienced member of the Polish secret service. Throughout the Thirties, he had held similar cover consular positions in a string of German cities - Breslau, Leipzig, Frankfurt and Munich - gathering information about the growth of the German military and industrial complex and making useful contacts.

Once in Berne, Choynecki (with cover name *Darek*) soon got to work building up various networks. His agents were assigned numbers between 500 and 600. By the intelligence sharing agreement between the Poles and the British, his reports were sent routinely after the fall of France to the Polish General Staff in London where they were handed on to the relevant British departments. But in Berne, Choynecki did not work only with the British. Polish cooperation had

been traditionally much closer with the French and one of his chief sources (Agent 501) was Commandant Pourchot, the Vichy Assistant Military Attache.

Later, after the arrival of OSS man Allen Dulles in Switzerland in November 1942, Choynecki got in touch with him. As it happened, Dulles was already acquainted with one of Choynecki's star agents, namely Eduard Schulte. It may be assumed, however, that in all such cooperative arrangements, Choynecki would not have divulged the names of his agents unless it was absolutely necessary. This was not just a security question. The recruitment of agents is a notoriously competitive business. To divulge a name is to run the risk of losing a source altogether to another friendly service with deeper pockets. For the Poles, whose standing with the British and Americans in no small measure depended on their ability to supply timely intelligence not already possessed by the allied major powers, their control and retention of sources was vital.



Major Choynecki (Swiss Federal Archives)

For the German intelligence services who had been been able to read his messages to

London, Choynecki became both a legend and a threat because of the importance and accuracy of his reporting. Wilhelm Flicke, a Sigint specialist who was familiar with the case, spoke glowingly of the Pole outshining the British Secret Service as "the sun outshone the moon". It was clear from Choynecki's traffic that he had at least one source placed at the very centre of the German High Command and Hitler personally ordered an investigation to find the traitor.

The interest in Choynecki's ace was reawakened much more recently with the revelations of a Cambridge historian, Paul Winter, who discovered documents showing that British intelligence had received most valuable intelligence via the Poles from a highly placed spy called sometimes KNOPF / AGENTS 594. Winter's research caught the attention of the world's press and soon the feats of this mystery man were circling the globe thanks to the internet. But there was one major omission in Winter's article: he was quite unable to identify the source behind the covername and ended by lamenting that unless SIS opened its archives, the problem would never be solved.

Happily this lament proved premature. Thanks to my own investigations, the identity of KNOPF/AGENTS 598 is no longer a mystery. As always, however, the solution of one problem generates another.

The key piece of new evidence was found in a statement of Hans von Pescatore who became head of Abwehr III F (German military counterespionage) in Berne at the beginning of 1944. He was thoroughly briefed about Choynecki and his agents. This is what he had to say:

An indication that there was deliberate treason, as well as insecurity, in the German camp, was revealed by a leakage of advance information about the planned German moves in Italy after 8 Sep 43, followed up by a signal of CHOJNACKI's saying: "Information referred to was reported on (date) by best informer of 594 speaking from Berlin (or OKW) in code." Subsequent investigations revealed that Hpt. (=Captain) Strünck of the OKW had spoken with GISEVIUS at ZURICH (both of the Abwehr) on the date in question and both became suspect, but nothing could be proved against them. The suspicion dropped when 594 was identified with KOPPELMANN. The identification of 594 with KOPPELMANN on the part of the Germans was due to a lapse on the part of CHOJNACKI, who sent a signal to the Polish General Staff in LONDON worded roughly as follows:- "In view of the exceptional merits of 594 request grant outstanding application approach Soviet authorities for information about his brother K, a Jew deported from Cernauti [CZERNOWITZ] to Siberia." A week later CHOJNACKI sent a second signal saying "person referred to in our no. X is called KOPPELMANN". Consultation of the central card-index revealed that there was a Leo

KOPPELMANN of CERNAUTI who had a brother Isidore known to have emigrated from VIENNA to BASLE.

The role of Isidore Koppelman in Choynecki's agent net is confirmed in another statement, this time by a wartime member of British intelligence:

During the past war, I served in the British intelligence service. In this capacity I made the acquaintance of important members of the Polish intelligence service. It was obliged to provide us with all their material. In Switzerland, a Polish military internee with the rank of major was the head of the Polish intelligence organisation. He was also in contact with the Swiss intelligence service. He is opposed to those who at present hold power in Poland and still lives in Switzerland. One of the best agents of the Polish intelligence service was Isidor Koppelman, resident in Basle. He used his considerable business contacts to bring interesting material on every conceivable subject in Germany to Switzerland.

To anyone who has read Walter Laqueur and Richard Breitman's book *Breaking the Silence* (1986) the name of Isidor Koppelman is already well-known. Koppelman had been the principal Swiss contact of Eduard Schulte at the end of July 1942, in conveying Schulte's information about the impending mass extermination of the Jews to the British and US. Governments. The two men had close commercial contacts. Schulte's firm Giesche had established a subsidiary in Switzerland called *Nonferron* with a capital of five million Swiss Francs. Its task was to arrange the financing of mining and industrial projects of interest to Giesche. Schulte was appointed President of *Nonferron* and from 1929, he was in the habit of making regular visits to Switzerland on business. During the war, Giesche was the sole supplier of Zinc and Zinc alloys to Switzerland.

Isidor Koppelman was the son of a state official in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire and had embarked on a successful career in banking and finance first in Vienna and later in Berlin. When Hitler came to power in Germany, Koppelman moved to Basle where he held a key role in the practical activities of the Swiss company *International Kapitalanlagen-Gesellschaft* (IKAP), a subsidiary of the banking house La Roche. During the war, IKAP'S special competence was the repatriation of Swiss assets which had been frozen due to wartime regulations. Since Koppelman, despite being a Jew, continued to enjoy excellent contacts with leading German financial institutions, including the *Reichsbank* and Ministry of Trade, he proved indispensable to IKAP in orchestrating deals of various kinds. Among his clients was Giesche's Erben of Breslau and its Swiss subsidiary Non-Ferron. Apart from its commercial aspects, this relationship provided Schulte and Koppelman with the perfect cover.



Isidore Koppelman, Agent 594 (Swiss Federal Archives)

By contrast, virtually nothing is known about how Koppelman's link to the Polish secret service came about and how the connection was maintained. Nevertheless there is one small detail which is perhaps worth mentioning. On September 14, 1939, the Swiss police authorities, citing the espionage law (*Spitzelgesetz*), decided to place Koppelman's post and telephone communications under surveillance. This surveillance was ended on March 6, 1940 and Koppelman was asked to visit the police where he answered a number of questions about names occurring in the monitored material. It all seemed very innocent. At one stage, he was asked if he knew a Herr Zamoyski in Paris. Koppelman's answer was as follows:

This has nothing to do with me or IKAP. Presumably it is a matter for the Polish Consulate in the same house at Rittergasse 12. There I have on one

occasion heard this name mentioned.

In short, the office of IKAP and the Polish Consulate in Basle occupied the same building. This made communication between Choynacki and Koppelman very easy.

While it is clear that Koppelman was AGENTS 598, it is equally clear that he was NOT the *primary* source at the German High Command but rather a cut-out or postbox for primary source reports, later relayed to Choynacki. But here, von Pescatore has conspicuously narrowed the field and pointed out three possible prime sources, Captain Strünck, Gisevius and Eduard Schulte. Indeed, **if** von Pescatore has got his account absolutely correct and **if** his words have been correctly reproduced, it would seem that the odds are on Strünck as Koppelman's best informant and Choynacki's real ace. After all, it was Strünck - not Gisevius, not Schulte - who was at the Berlin end of the line when the crucial telephone call was made. However there are important matters of interpretation involved. It may be that Strünck rather than acting completely autonomously and individually, had been simply allotted the special task of maintaining the flow of information to Switzerland by a small kernel of oppositional Abwehr officers which almost certainly included Oster and Gisevius.

Strünck and Gisevius were old friends. Whereas much is known about Gisevius through his co-operation with Allen Dulles, Strünck remains a relatively obscure figure. Yet books such as Peter Hoffman's *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* and even more Gisevius' own book *Wo is Nebe?* confirm that Strünck had been one of the most dedicated and active opponents of the Hitler regime whose resistance long antedated the war. The bare bones of his life are as follows. Theodor Strünck was born near Kiel in 1885. A lawyer by profession - he held a doctorate in law - he later became a director of the Victoria Insurance Company in Frankfurt. In 1937, he was asked by Hans Oster, Canaris' deputy, to join the Abwehr and was placed with OKW at the Bendlerblock in Berlin. He and his wife Elisabeth were already active in secret opposition to Hitler. As Gisevius loyally records, their house was regularly used by members of the resistance and this practice was continued during the war. He remained an intimate of both Canaris and Oster, in touch with them on a daily basis in Berlin and thus directly privy to some of the most closely guarded secrets of the *Reich*. It is clear that he also maintained a close relationship with Gisevius when the latter was in Switzerland. He also worked closely with Carl Goerdeler, a leader of the conservative wing of the resistance. During the war, he undertook a number of missions to Switzerland on behalf of the opposition. It is known that he was in touch with Allen Dulles and passed on information to him. Strünck remained in Germany to the bitter end. Although he could certainly have arranged asylum for himself, he feared that his family would be left to face the music alone. On August 1, 1944, he and his wife were arrested for their role in the July attempt on Hitler's life. On October 10, he was sentenced to death by the People's Court and this sentence was carried out at the very end of the war on April 9, 1945 at Flossenbürg camp in Bavaria, when Strünck, Canaris and Oster were hanged. Captain Strünck's wife, Elisabeth survived the war as did Koppelman, Schulte and Gisevius. As for Major Choynacki, the man with a scar on his left wrist,

he continued working with Western intelligence services after the war, in a scheme in conjunction with a Ukrainian group based in Germany to spy on Russia. *Plus ça change.....*

Looking back, it is somewhat strange that the German security organs knowing as much as they did, failed to strike sooner against the suspects. The Abwehr itself may have concealed evidence or succeeded in muddying the waters sufficiently to throw the Gestapo off the spoor that led back to Berlin. Certainly Canaris and his friends had everything to lose from a Gestapo probe. Even the old man himself was not beyond suspicion. The Admiral had made every effort at the outbreak of the war to place Halina Szymanska, the wife of the former Polish Military Attache in Berlin, in safety in Switzerland. But Szymanska was in touch with both Gisevius and Major Choynecki...



Monument to Bonhoeffer, Canaris, Gehre, Oster, von Rabenau, Sack and Strünck at Flossenbürg. (Concordiadomi, CCA-SA 3.0)