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## *Irv Refkin, Brash Accidental Spy in World War II, Dies at 96*

By Sam Roberts

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Irv Refkin, an impromptu but daring spy who served the United States and Britain as a saboteur, assassin and courier behind enemy lines in Europe during World War II, died on Thursday at his home in San Diego. He was 96.

His death was confirmed by a friend, Vera Davis.

Dispatched from England, Mr. Refkin, a scrappy 5-foot-6 Wisconsin native, was said to have smuggled explosives to the French Resistance in Paris, infiltrated Nazi Germany to kill specific targets integral to the Nazi war machine, and sabotaged train tracks to slow the deployment of German tanks to Normandy before the Allied invasion on D-Day.

On his clandestine missions inside Germany, he would disguise himself in a Wehrmacht corporal's uniform.

“No one,” he explained, “has ever noticed a corporal.”

He also carried out assignments in Italy, the Soviet Union and South Africa.

Mr. Refkin, who was discharged as a master sergeant after the war, was awarded the Bronze Star. In 2014, he received the Distinguished Service Award from the Office of Strategic Services Society, an association of alumni from the wartime intelligence predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency.

“O.S.S. founder General William Donovan described O.S.S. personnel as ‘glorious amateurs’ who performed ‘some of the bravest acts of the war;’ ” said Charles Pinck, president of the society, in an email. “That’s a perfect description of Irv Refkin.”

Last year, when legislation was pending to award the Congressional Gold Medal to World War II spies who served behind enemy lines, Mr. Refkin lobbied for speedy adoption, arguing that the ranks of those former spies were dwindling.

“We’re all in our mid-90s,” he said. “We’re not going to be here that long.”

President Barack Obama signed the legislation in December 2016, but the medals have not yet been formally conferred.

Isadore Irving Refkin was born on June 7, 1921, in Milwaukee to Samuel and Anna Refkin, Jewish immigrants from Russia.

According to his account, his parents were killed in an auto accident when he was 3 or 4, and for the next 10 years he was raised in a German Lutheran orphanage. Then, he said, with \$3.26 in his pocket, he fended for himself.

After completing high school he attended Marquette University in Milwaukee for two years, then enlisted in the Army in 1940 when he was 19 to avail himself of the proverbial “three hots and a cot” — a place to eat and sleep. After basic training, he was sent to Canada for instruction in explosives.

According to his account, he had a run-in with a senior officer there who extracted revenge by putting him on a plane to Britain without notice. By the time the authorities there realized he was not Canadian, and before the United States Army learned he was missing, he had parachuted into occupied France to apply his skills as a demolition expert and a speaker of German.

“If they catch you they’re going to kill you for being Jewish,” an officer warned him, Mr. Refkin recalled in an interview for the strategic services society this year.

“If they catch me for being a spy, is it going to be any easier?” he asked.

When the officer replied no, Mr. Refkin said, he delivered a typically practical response.

“One way or another,” he said, “I can’t let them catch me.”

He said he carried out three successful missions for the British. Once the United States entered the war he performed special assignments for the Americans, according to the society.

On one, he was ordered to retrieve a confidential file from what turned out to be a cabinet secured by a combination lock. When he could not open it, he came back with the entire cabinet — then was ordered to return it so the Germans wouldn’t discover that the secret file was missing.

On another occasion, he recalled, he was having drinks with a Wehrmacht colonel in a Paris hotel when a Gestapo officer asked for their identification. The colonel expressed such indignation that the frazzled Gestapo officer stalked off, and Mr. Refkin sardonically declared, “These young Gestapo guys don’t even check papers well anymore.”

In contrast to its successor agencies, Mr. Refkin said, the O.S.S. encouraged its field agents improvise as needed.

“They told you what they wanted to get done,” he said, “but they didn’t tell you how to do it.”

In addition to his exploits as a spy, in his regularly assigned role as an airplane inspector he developed a device for administering oxygen to patients.

After the war, he married Anna Bruno. She died in 1990. The couple lived in Southern California, where Mr. Refkin owned a ship repair company and other businesses.

He is survived by three children, Allen and Charles Refkin and Michele Refkin-Holtz; four grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

“I grew up knowing I had nothing, I deserved nothing, and I did something pretty worthwhile,” he said of his wartime service, which fewer and fewer of his colleagues are left to recall firsthand.

“You still have nightmares,” he said, “and that will continue on until after I’m gone.”

*Editors’ Note: November 13, 2017*

*An earlier version of this obituary said of Mr. Refkin that “according to his account, his parents were killed in an auto accident when he was 3 or 4, and for the next 10 years he was raised in a German Lutheran orphanage.” This account was taken from an interview Mr. Refkin gave to the Office of Strategic Services Society.*

*After the obituary was published, The Times learned that Mr. Refkin’s parents were not killed in an auto accident, and that he was an adult when they both died, his mother in 1943 and his father in 1960.*

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