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## ***Fred Kovaleski, Once a Spy in a Tennis Disguise, Dies at 93***

By **Richard Sandomir**

May 29, 2018

Fred Kovaleski, whose international tennis-playing career became his cover in the 1950s while he was working as a spy for the C.I.A., died on Friday at his home in Manhattan. He was 93.

Serge Kovaleski, his son, said the cause was prostate cancer that had spread.

Mr. Kovaleski was well into his career on the tennis circuit, having played at Wimbledon and in tournaments abroad and in the United States, when he joined the C.I.A. in 1951 and began training in spycraft at Camp Peary, near Williamsburg, Va.

Within three years, his ability to play tennis and his Russian-language training with the C.I.A. became essential when Yuri Rastvorov, a K.G.B. lieutenant colonel and avid tennis player, defected to the United States.

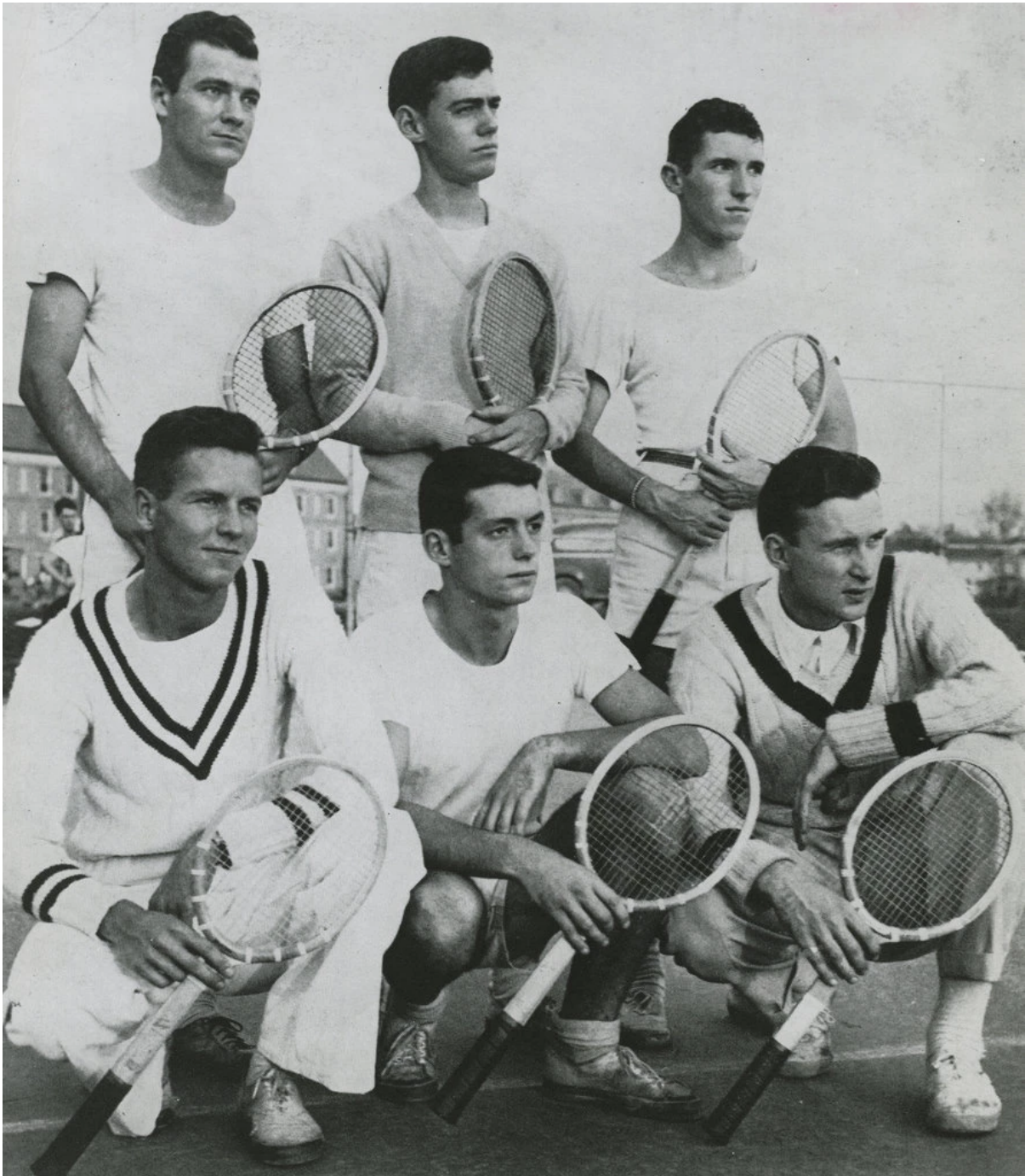
Mr. Rastvorov — a major espionage asset who revealed important information about the K.G.B. and the Soviet government — defected in Tokyo and was taken to a C.I.A. safe house in Potomac, Md., where agents interrogated him for hours every day for months. Mr. Kovaleski, his handler, did not participate in the interrogations; at night, they talked, and the information he gleaned went into his reports.

“It was all business,” Mr. Kovaleski was quoted as saying in a 2006 article in The Washington Post Magazine written by his son, who is now a reporter for The New York Times. “It was stern and sterile. The attitude was that this is an enemy officer, and we owned him now, and we were going to squeeze all the information possible out of him.”

Mr. Kovaleski acted more like a friend to Mr. Rastvorov, whose code name was Dipper 19. They drank and played tennis together.

“When it came time to play, 19 was like a horse bounding out of the starting gate,” Mr. Kovaleski told The Post.

Two or three times a week, the tennis-loving spies played on a court at another C.I.A. officer’s house nearby.



Fred Kovaleski, bottom right, with tennis teammates at William and Mary in the late 1940s. William & Mary Alumni Association

“I never hit a winner against him,” Mr. Kovaleski said in *The Post*. “The idea was to make him feel better about himself, to soothe his ego. And I think the tennis was real therapy for him.”

(The concept of tennis as an espionage cover would reach popular culture in the 1960s with the television series “*I Spy*,” starring Robert Culp and Bill Cosby as agents posing as a tennis player and his coach. But Serge Kovaleski said the show was not based on his father’s experience.)

Fred Kovaleski helped arrange for two prostitutes to visit Mr. Rastvorov, who had left behind a wife and young daughter in Moscow. They took trips to bars and restaurants in Washington. With an agency driver at the wheel during one of their outings, their car struck a calf that had wandered onto a rural road. Mr. Rastvorov received cuts and bruises and hid in the bushes when bystanders gathered around the dying calf. Mr. Rastvorov, who had no identification, could not risk being exposed.

He and Mr. Kovaleski parted in August 1954, when the State Department publicly revealed that Mr. Rastvorov had defected and been granted asylum.

Mr. Kovaleski’s next mission was in Cairo, where the C.I.A. was tapping the Soviet Embassy’s phone lines; Mr. Kovaleski translated the conversations. Soon after, he brought a Soviet defector from Alexandria to Cairo for a transfer to West Germany.

While in Cairo, he met and fell in love with Manya (Poliakine) Jabes, whose Russian-born parents had fled to Egypt after the Russian Revolution. She was married at the time to an Egyptian banker with two children. After her divorce, he petitioned the C.I.A. to approve their marriage; the agency was wary of its agents’ marrying foreigners who could be security risks.

“I supplied her name, birth date, family members, et cetera, all of which was cabled back to D.C. for security processing,” Mr. Kovaleski told the *College of William & Mary* alumni magazine in 2010. “They discovered that Manya’s father had divorced Manya’s mother, married another Russian woman who was a poet and returned to the Soviet Union.”

Because Manya’s family ties were considered a problem by the C.I.A., Mr. Kovaleski was told that he would have to leave the agency if he married her. He resigned, and they were married in Beirut on April 1, 1957.

“He was really over the moon about her,” their son said in a telephone interview. “She became the focus of his life.”

Fred Kovaleski, his wife Manya, his son Serge, and Serge Kovaleski's wife at the time, Jo Becker, at Fred's 2005 United States Tennis Association Eastern Hall of Fame induction.  
Ed Goldman

Fred Thomas Kovaleski was born on Oct. 8, 1924, in Maynard, Mass., and grew up in a Polish enclave in Hamtramck, Mich. Like his mother, Mr. Kovaleski's father, Frank, an automotive assembly line worker, had immigrated from Poland. As a boy, Fred played handball well, which prompted a gym teacher, Jean Hoxie, to suggest that he play tennis. When his father declined to buy him a \$10 racket, Ms. Hoxie did, and she taught him to play. By 17, he was a member of the U.S. Junior Davis Cup team.

"Hoxie says to me, 'Fred, I want you to get out of this town,' " he told the William & Mary magazine. She helped arrange for him to attend William & Mary on a tennis scholarship.

But soon after starting college, he enlisted in the Army. As a paratrooper with the 11th Airborne Division, he helped liberate about 2,100 prisoners from Los Banos, a Japanese internment camp in the Philippines, in 1945. After the war, he returned to William & Mary, was part of the team that won the N.C.A.A. tennis championships in 1947 and '48 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science.

In 1950, he lost in the final of the United States National Indoor Tennis Championships and reached the fourth round of Wimbledon. Early the next year, while playing in Egypt, he met a United States Embassy official who offered to direct him to a post-tennis career with the State Department. When he asked for the help, the path led to an interview with the C.I.A.

With tennis as his cover, he continued to play in tournaments. While competing at the National Tennis Championships in Forest Hills, Queens, in 1954, he was identified as a "tall, dark-haired Defense Department worker."

When his time with the agency ended in 1957, Mr. Kovaleski started work as a trainee with Pepsi in Khartoum, Sudan. He worked around the world at increasingly higher levels of the international divisions of Revlon, Schering-Plough and Nabisco Brands.

And he continued to play tennis, until age 92, as one of the world's top-ranked seniors.

His wife died in 2014. His son is his only immediate survivor.

Mr. Kovaleski encountered Mr. Rastvorov several times after their tennis matches in 1954. By then, Mr. Rastvorov had a new name — Martin Simons — had owned a restaurant and laundromats and had married a wealthy woman. They met for the last time at the Edgemoor Club in Bethesda, Md., where Mr. Kovaleski was playing tennis and saw Mr. Simons watching from a lounge chair.

“You still play elegant,” the former K.G.B. spy told Mr. Kovaleski, according to The Washington Post article. “You are maestro.”

Mr. Kovaleski suggested that they get together, but Mr. Simons was not ready to make a date.

“As Martin limped away,” Mr. Kovaleski said, “he moved like an old, tired bear.”

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