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Inside the Bundesnachrichtendienst

In the course of my life, twice I got very close to the German Foreign Intelligence Service – the Bundesnachrichtendienst or BND. First, there was that huge authority, recognizable very secretly and shadowy, being by any means an unknown something for the majority of the German population. During that time foreign countries still knew less about the German Foreign Intelligence Service, This was o.k., as the organisation worked as a secret service and was supposed to find out everything beyond the borders being necessary for the security of the old Federal Republic.

In the early years of the BND everything had to be coordinated with the American friends, later – appropriate to the respective historical times - with European partners or possible new partner services; Israelis, for example. The Foreign Intelligence Service was no domestic state security service. If it was taking care of German nationals during those times, there was always a massive international connection, and of course a political on top of that.

This mysterious establishment, sitting for decades behind high walls in the posh Munich suburb of Pullach, to the public was not existent at all. Under normal circumstances none of its employees ever should refer to it. If ever a curious question concerning their job emerged, they'd have to murmur something about the Federal Administration of Properties or so. No one was allowed to speak about further details without need.

Each employee was – in the case of someone asking about his or her job - supposed to change the subject or in very extreme cases leave the asking person in the rain. No stranger was allowed to find out something about our Foreign Intelligence Service. This message was also hammered home to me the day I signed up. This was the rule. We did not break this rule because it could have endangered the whole job and with it our very own existences, of colleagues and informants. Conspiracy was everything, very confidential gathering of data in the name and order of the Federal Republic was the aim.

If we would have been an organization like many others, we could have adopted the CIA definition of intelligence, because it sounds so harmless.

Quote: "Reduced to its simplest terms, intelligence is knowledge and foreknowledge of the world around us. The prelude to decision and action by .... Policymakers. Intelligence organizations provide this information in a fashion that helps consumers, either civilian leaders or military commanders, to consider alternative options and outcomes. The intelligence process involves the painstaking and generally tedious collection of facts, their analysis, quick and clear evaluations, production of intelligence assessments, and their timely dissemination to consumers. Above all, the analytical process must be rigorous, timely, and relevant to policy needs and concerns."

We understood our job to be honorable – and important. We did back up the "shop" how we used to call the Foreign Intelligence Service ironically (and for our own privacy it was an anonymous term), and the service supported us. We lived in this environment of feelings, at least during that certain period which today seems so awfully far away. Why and how still has to be explained, without praising the "esprit de corps" of the Old Boys' Network as always accurate.

But let's go back to the year 1982, just before I joined the BND. I had given up safety of an editor's contract with the

weekly magazine QUICK long ago and had exchanged this for a book contract with Droemer Knaur Publishers. For this, I traveled widely in Near and Middle Eastern countries, investigated and researched about "Secret commandos of Islam". This later became the subtitle of my book „Holy War". Of course, the BND became aware of my journalistic activities and from then on, I was not overlooked anymore when I asked the service's press office for background briefings about sensitive regions. Soon after I had gone on some rather tricky assignments, for example the one in the Syrian city of Hama where the Assad regime just had survived an Islamic coup, the BND's friendly spokesman contacted me, asking whether I could imagine to carry out a non-journalistic background conversation with his Near and Middle East colleagues. Well, I did not only imagine this, I actually went for it.

The first meeting took place at a Sheraton Hotel in Munich. It felt a bit like a casting for a TV show, 'Germany's Got Talent' if you will. Two of my future colleagues tried to get to know me, getting me to talk about my working methods. About Hama. How I did get in and out alive of the city while the Syrian Army killed thousands of its inhabitants with artillery fire; about my experiences and relations in other corners of that powder keg called "Middle East". We spoke about the menu of the Italian restaurant at the first floor of the five star Cham Hotel in Damascus, and about a Syrian airbase which one could overlook from a certain spot on the road to Palmyra in the centre of the country.

We also touched on personal, informal things: My activities during ten long years as a journalist, my visions for the future. Both "interviewers" wanted to know, why I would turn my back just now to a well-paid employment and how would loyalty look like in case of confidential activity.

"*Can you imagine receiving information, reporting and sharing them exclusively with us, in case whatever you get to know would also be of great interest and use to you as a journalist?*", they asked me.

Would wandering on the fine line between both jobs and two separate existences be suitable for me?

They warned me: "You must understand that you will never ever be able to open up about whatever your job would be at the Foreign Intelligence Service. No outsider may get to know about it or suspect something. This is for your own good and your own interest."

My responses must have been suffienciently positive to the two officers as the unusual meeting concluded very cordially and we agreed on a further meeting within days. For me, everything was clear. My interests where about the Near and Middle East, and a job with the BND would co-incide smoothly with my specialization. For me at the time, there were no questions of ethics and morality. I considered it as a relatively normal relationship between employer and employee. On top, it served West German security. Strange enough, even in today's public debate in Germany, aspects of national security are almost always overshadowed by a hasty scandalisation as soon as the the aspect of secret service work pops up in the context.

It should take weeks and several lengthy meetings, until the framework of a future cooperation between me and the BND was sorted out. My new partners were part of the Department 16A, responsible for intelligence in the Near and Middle East. The department was led by an old warhorse called Cornelis Hausleiter, who mostly went by the cover name Carl Hagemann, and who was one of the post-war "founding fathers" of the BND.

I had never before heard about Hausleiter, as he had avoided all headlines and so far nobody ever talked about him. During those times the BND did not produce an endless chain of scandals and headlines; behind the high walls of the former Nazi residential area called "Camp Nikolaus" a really sworn-in community lived in the elegant south of Munich. At that time the cold war had just reached its climax. Absolute secrecy was the most important duty. We took this unconditionally serious and always stuck to it.

This was one of the reasons why it took me quite some time to understand that the abbreviation "16A" - the department I worked for - stood for a quite unusual small squad. It was composed of die-hard civilians, also former military members and true daredevils in the best sense, who after being dismissed from Foreign Intelligence Service did not see any problem in coaching Gaddafis body guards and others being devoted to development and distribution of complex security technology. 16A, I also learned step by step, with great pleasure indulged in exploring their own ways, not always being fully transparent to the BND's higher officials.

Because of their unconventional methods, the men of 16A were also used as some sort of fire brigade well beyond their usual Middle Eastern playing field. Quite often we had to answer urgent alarm calls because political arsonists in the widest sense had kicked off yet another emergency, or because we expected somewhere in our area of interest a major wildfire to break out imminently.

16A stood in absolute contrast to boring rituals at other departments where they fiddled for days in order to just organize a simple official trip. 16A, were the practical people, the reason for success of my ten years and eight months as a member at the BND.

As a complete newcomer to secret service work, I now had to go about learning the tricks of the trade. The dos and don'ts, the bureaucratic language with its numerous cryptic abbreviations. Conspiracy was paramount, as well as building up a permanent firewall against friends and even family. Everybody was to believe that I was doing my numerous trips to more and more exotic places as part of my already most busy journalist's life.

I had to carry on my normal and usual professional functions as a journalist, should not spend loads of cash of unexplainable origin or boast about my „new possibilities". Nobody should detect a sudden change. This was not too easy as all transactions of the BND were exclusively executed in cash. Travel expenses were paid in advance and after my return accounts and fees were to be settled in cash.

My favorite was the so-called "activity fund". 180 Deutschmarks per day as pocket money, and I didn't even have to account for how I spent this. Of course I paid my informants in cash. Later on, as the mighty machinery was moving more or less by itself, I was allowed to send money to my informants abroad by wire transfer. The given reasons for the payments were absolutely harmless of course and delusive for outsiders. It could be for instance, that I paid the debts of an Arabian importer of the glass manufacturer Swarowski in Austria. The businessman then forwarded the money to one of my informants.

The work itself was not much different from my job as a journalist. I researched and investigated as I would have normally done. As you have already heard in some of your previous lectures, there are indeed a number of similarities between journalism and intelligence work. Only, at the BND just very specific and mostly top secret details were of interest.

Which regular journalist would have tried to get the manual of the new MiG-29 in order to write an article series about it? Or even print the booklet as a facsimile. Who would ever want to publish the secretly procured travel data of a possibly quite dangerous Lebanese in his newspaper? As I said, the secret service job was similar to journalism in its methods, but nevertheless, in many ways it was completely different in its contents.

Of course a meeting in a foreign town, being the very first meeting with a new informant or a not so well known informant, made me think of appropriate safety measures. I used to arrive one or two days in advance, hanging around, getting to know places and orbiting the later point of meeting, taking a close look at entrances and exits, underground parking, possible escape routes as well as access roads. In most cases meetings took place in a hotel or a restaurant. For safety reasons and as a rule, I used to stay at a different hotel. Nothing was left to coincidence, and I had to stay in control of developments at all times. Only on a few very special occasions I was willing to change the meeting point on short telephone notice – a tactical method by secret services to be able to determine further developments.

During all my intelligence trips I took great care not to fall back on well-worn rituals. For example, I would announce my arrival with the 6 p.m. plane, but in reality I was already on the 12 p.m. flight. I never used the direct road to the meeting place, most times a wide detour took me there. I would not use a taxi, but the underground. I shook off possible pursuers, crossing through a crowded department store, the underground car park of a hotel, sneaking in at on one side, out at the other, or used the various possibilities of a railway station or the labyrinth of a big company where no one knew me. Only if I had made sure that nobody followed, I headed for my real destination, acting in similar fashion on my way back.

In the BND there was no "Q" like the one we know from the Bond movies. No head of a research or developing department appeared before starting an official trip presenting new technical gadgets. I remember only two opportunities where I received some technical aids. After an Arab League conference (1989 in Amman) I flew out to Cyprus and wrote a long report for headquarters. For this, I used the early version of a relatively small laptop with a separate modem supposedly developed by our own technicians. The modem encrypted my texts. Later they told me that everything had worked out fine.

For emergencies I received an old fashioned note pad with paper sheets whose pages would dissolve as soon as they touched water. In seconds the snow-white sheet of paper became a milky pulp which then could be washed down the sink. Nobody would ever be able to put the contents back together. The process itself seemed to be a magic trick.

There was some more distinction between us and James Bond or Jack Ryan: BND agents back then did not use hand guns, no weapons at all. (Even today, this is only rarely the case.) We collected information with pencil and ballpoint pen; in rather rare cases with recording devices and cameras. No doubt about it: Having a choice, we preferred complete files and official documents. Paper is heavy stuff, so sometimes I could hardly carry the material. In those days, there was no USB stick, no flash drive, not even a laptop computer available.

In summer of 1982 the commodity "news" for me suddenly had a new quality. This contributed to preventing me from mixing up both occupations. Quite clear, I was able to see the border between media and intelligence service and adjusted myself to it. I did not get into any problems because I carried out both activities mutually exclusive

and professionally. However, the BND became my most important assignment. While I got to know the inner workings of the institution, for me it quickly lost its mysterious aura. Never ever I showed temptations acting as a sort of "double-o seven". Anyhow, my regional fields of work didn´t really provide us with Bond girls or even remote lookalikes.

The German Foreign Intelligence Service was and is a rather unflexible bureaucracy where the limitations of daily office hours and extra payments for business trips play an immensely important role. At least during my time pencils were substituted by artificial extensions so that they could be used up to the last centimeter. And, moreover, as we say in German: Von der Wiege bis zur Bahre – Formulare, Formulare, Formulare. In English it doesn´t rhyme: From the cradle to the grave – forms, forms, forms. This is a basic proverb in the BND community. A guideline through the official tracks of Pullach – and today of Berlin.

Fortunately, I was able to avoid most of the paper trail, because my handlers took care of it. I had to concentrate exclusively on the procurement of information, recruiting new sources and the communication with our informers. It was exhausting enough. From the early Eighties into the Nineties I was working for the BND under my my real name and – internally – under the cover name "Dali" all over the area of crisis between India and Tunisia. I maintained comprehensive contacts with high ranking executives, operatives of intelligence services and members of liberation movements.

No questions about it: In the old days, some of them have been our partners, today they are considered to be terrorists. One example out of many: Golbuddin Hekmatyar, the Afghan warlord. In the Eighties we had lots in common with him, today his name is on the same wanted list as Bin Laden's. As a journalist, I covered the wars and military skirmishes of the Eighties, sometimes from the front row. The BND was always interested in background and inside knowledge of every war theatre, the military situation of the opponents, their equipment as well as the identity of their suppliers. The same old story was repeating itself from Afghanistan to Iran and Iraq, from Lebanon down to Yemen.

In addition, I was collecting data on political and business developments, military and police secrets, about arms trade and drug trafficking – and, of course, international terrorism became more and more important for us. For years I followed the trail of Carlos and his gang. In some ways, Carlos was the Bin Laden of his period. It was a bunch of brutal mercenaries, far away from the fake political image they tried to spread.

I managed to penetrate the organization of the Palestinian separatist Abu Nidal. For a while, we were able to track the travel movements of his operatives. From insiders I purchased the real names and personal data of many activists, in a number of cases even informations about their intentions and aims before they even started to travel. According to the internal statistics, I submitted 856 reports during my work with the BND. In comparison with other agents, this was quite a lot.

So – did the risks I took during my job as a secret agent pay off at least financially? All in all, for a total of 130 months of cooperation with the BND I received a salary of about 234 000 Deutschmarks , and 418 000 Marks for the travel expenses. In other words: I made on average about 1800 Deutschmarks a month from my intelligence work, which in today's terms would probably be as much Euros. As you see, real-life intelligence agents are far from leading a lavish lifestyle. The BND made it almost imperative for an agent like me to have a second job in order to maintain social standards.

My relation with the BND ended in early 1993, "double-o eight" being the reason. This was the nickname of Bernd Schmidbauer, the then-Minister of State in the Office of the German Chancellor, whose task was to coordinate Germany's intelligence services. He always smiled when someone called him 008, as he liked this nickname. Intelligence work was his most favorite pastime and so he enjoyed dealing with the complicated case of two German hostages in Lebanon. Not just Schmidbauer, many colleagues from the BND were busy with it. Myself, I was involved in all the German hostage cases between the years 1987 to 1992.

What was the background? Some of you might know, that two members of the Lebanese Shiite Hamadi clan had been arrested at Frankfurt Airport because of their involvement in terrorist acts, like for example the hijacking drama of TWA 847 in 1985. In return, the Hamadi clan kidnapped Germans in order to exchange them for their relatives. In the Eighties Lebanon was a real hotspot for abductions. Through mediation of the United Nations in June 1992 the very last hostages were been released after 1128 days of captivity. Minister Schmidbauer was involved in the case only since the end of 1991, and travelled to Beirut in order to pick them up and bring them home to Germany.

The ambitious conservative Politician took his chance to put himself in the spotlight, so the rest of the world see him as the "rescuer". He never rectified this impression created by the media, instead quite enjoyed the image of being a hero. [gekuerzt]

Naturally, this created created some discomfort within the BND. Some old hands who had worked for years on a positive outcome and solution for the kidnapped Germans, saw such headlines with astonishment. They resented the fact that some non-expert politician was trying to appropriate was they saw as their own success.

A short time later I attended an international terrorism conference in Budapest. I was invited to this conference due to my membership at the Bonn based Institute of Terrorism Research and because I had published several essays on this topic. Official discussions included how Germany had dealt with the problem of hostages in Lebanon. Schmidbauers "heroism" concerning this issue was made a subject and openly celebrated.

I was very much afraid that this untrue version would in effect become a true fact for the experts of the conference. I had my say and in a short statement I tried to explain the background of the misunderstanding, that Schmidbauer had "liberated the kidnapped NGO-workers". Unsurprisingly, my "corrections" of the official version did not go down well with BND top officials, who were obsessed with political correctness vis-a-vis their political masters. Predictably, this turned out to be the beginning of the end of my job with the BND.

My nerves had already been on the edge already for a long time, after I had experienced that my personal security was very low on the BND's priority list when I was sent on assignments.

Already, in the Middle East I detected a growing mistrust during meetings with officials. Did other services start to investigate about me? Did they check any concrete suspicions against me? In theory a plausible denial is always at hand, but what if this would lead to a life-threatening situation? I was really not keen on finding out first-hand.

The character of my work with the BND and the atmosphere clearly started to change. Now, it was all about mechanically getting intelligence collection jobs done. The once-cordial warmth, the informal social atmosphere of the early years, which had been the primary base of confidence, had disappeared, and some liaison officers of the early days of my intelligence work had already retired.

When an operation ended in success, this achievement would sooner or later be claimed by other departments trying to score political points. The truth was, we were no more the pawns in a bigger game.

In early 1993 the separation between me and the BND was formalised – ironically at the same spot where we met the very first time, at the Munich Sheraton. An official gave me routine security instructions - he told me, to be absolutely discrete concerning all matters during my years with the BND. He listed half a dozen countries which for security reasons I could not visit during the near future.

An important period of my life had found its conclusion.

(eine leicht modifizierte Form des deutschen Textes "Vom Bundesnachrichtendienst")