Manhattan Project Spies and Oak Ridge, Part 4

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 29, 2014)

Continuing with the fourth and final installment of the Historically Speaking series on Manhattan Project Spies with connections to Oak Ridge, we now examine Al Slack, according to Dr. John Googin's autobiography, Al Slack was a shift supervisor at Y-12 during the Manhattan Project.

Alfred Dean Slack was born in 1906. He worked at the Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, NY, where he first sold commercial information first to Richard Briggs, thinking it was going to a competitor of Kodak, but learned it was actually going to the Soviet Union. Later after Briggs sudden death, Slack was handed off by Soviet agents to Harry Gold who became the courier to provide the information to the Soviet Union.

Harry Gold (December 11, 1911 - August 28, 1972) was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Russian Jewish immigrants. By 1940, Gold was a recruited Soviet agent assigned the codename GUS, or GOOSE.

As often happens with Historically Speaking, these articles on spies in Oak Ridge have produced several contacts with people who have additional information. I received a contact from Mike Finn concerning Al Slack.

Mike said, "I have a personal connection. My family has had a farm in Webster, NY (just outside Rochester) for over a century. From time to time I heard stories about the spy who lived next door in the late 1930's, early 40's, and who moved to Oak Ridge. They mentioned the name of Harry Gold."

Mike continued, "I was a bit skeptical and wanted to know more. Recently, I purchased a biography of Harry Gold, by Allen Hornblum, Yale University Press, 2010. It did not mention the town of Webster specifically, but did indicate that Slack worked at Kodak and lived on a farm nearby, so I am confident it was Alfred Dean Slack. Harry Gold visited him at the farm per the book so the story checks out."

In 1950, Klaus Fuchs was arrested in England and identified Harry Gold as the courier he used to pass information to the Soviets. This act may have been THE most damaging of all.

Gold admitted that he had helped Fuchs pass information about the Manhattan Project to the Soviet Union. Gold's confession also led to the arrest of David Greenglass as well as the arrest, trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

After the time Al Slack spent in New York, he later worked for Tennessee Eastman at the Holston Ordinance Works in Kingsport, TN, before coming to Oak Ridge. It was there that Gold pressured him to provide him more information or he would expose the fact that he had already provided information that had been shared with the Soviets.

Slack provided Harry Gold with information on the explosive RDX, manufactured as "Compound B" that was used in World War II and was more powerful than TNT. This information helped spread knowledge about the most powerful explosive that existed at the time.

I have yet to find definitive proof of specific information Slack provided to the Soviets about Oak Ridge. Yet, Harry Gold was a key connection to several other spies and would have known of the importance of Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project.

Slack was included by the FBI in the broad "Rosenberg Network" of Soviet spies in the book, *FBI – KGB War, A Special Agent's Story*, by Robert J. Lamphere and Tom Shachtman. So, he may well have been involved in providing more information than just the two incidents identified before he came to Oak Ridge.

After Klaus Fuchs was arrested in England in February 1950, he implicated Harry Gold as his courier. This information was passed to the FBI. When the FBI followed up and searched Harry Gold's home they

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found a map of New Mexico in his belongings.

He had claimed to have never been west of the Mississippi River. When shown this map, he admitted that he was not being truthful. From that point on, he seemed to be relieved to get the facts out and get the whole situation out in the open, according to Lamphere and Shachtman. He helped the FBI locate many other spies by telling them all the details he could remember about the people who were giving him secret information and to whom he gave these documents.

During FBI interrogation, Harry Gold included AI Slack as someone he had contact with and for whom he had transported information to his Soviet connections. Gold was the person who gave the names of most, if not all, of the spies uncovered in 1950. I find it of interest that George Koval is NOT listed among the "Rosenberg Network." This indicates to me that he was operating independently as an official Soviet spy.

Al Slack was tried before Judge Robert Taylor in Greenville, TN, and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He was 44 years old at the time of his arrest on June 15, 1950 and indicted on September 1, 1950. He was no longer at Oak Ridge, but was in Syracuse, NY, when arrested. Judge Taylor made an unusual observation about Slack. He noted that the information provided to Russia was done while the U. S. and Russia were allies, yet Slack was being tried when the two countries were no longer allies.

The recent explosion of an atomic weapon by Russia had heightened the sensitivity of any information flow from the U. S. to Russia. The fact that the Russians had even been able to create an atomic weapons capability was because of the spies being tried in the 1950. The Cold War certainly influenced the trial outcome for Al Slack.

Slack was living in Syracuse, NY, and working as a chemist in a paint manufacturing company when he was first questioned as a result of Harry Gold turning him in as a source of information he obtained and passed to the Russians. He was charged with two counts of providing information to Gold.

Slack later attempted to have the court vacate his sentence by claiming that his constitutional rights had been infringed. The trial court denied his motion. However, on appeal, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, at the request of the United States Attorney General, reversed the trial court and remanded the case to the District Court for a hearing.

Slack contended that his court appointed attorneys did not properly advise and represent him of the interpretation placed on the Espionage act that espionage laws are not violated by furnishing information from public sources. Slack claimed that was the case with the RDX explosive information.

After a lengthy hearing the District Court again denied his motion declaring his contention was a "concocted afterthought." The appeals court agreed with the trial court as did the U.S. Supreme Court.

Al Slack, like Klaus Fuchs and George Koval, seems to have been able to fit in and to deceive those close to him into trusting him with information. However, unlike Fuchs and Koval, he seems to have been motivated by money and by pressure from Harry Gold.

He does not seem to have had any connections with communism or other ideals that would have caused him to want to betray the U.S. atomic bomb project or to share information about that effort. He was only marginally involved in the spy network and that only through Harry Gold.

So, while two spies are known to have worked in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project, George Koval and Al Slack, George Koval was by far the most significant. Having been born a U. S. citizen, educated in Russia, recruited by the Main Intelligence Directorate known generally as the "GRU," Koval's deep penetration of the Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge and especially at Dayton, OH, remained undisclosed for over 50 years.

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I believe the polonium information that George Koval provided from his work in Oak Ridge and even more so in Dayton, OH, was crucial information that assisted the Soviet Union quickly design and build their first atomic bomb.

And I find that AI Slack provided information from Eastman Kodak regarding photographic processes and information from the Holston Ordinance Works in Kingsport, TN, about the RDX explosive. As to what information he provided about Oak Ridge, I am unsure. However, I wonder if he did provide more than just the two incidents mentioned above. Else why would he be included in the "Rosenberg Network" and been given 15 years in prison? I am still researching this one...

In actuality, Klaus Fuchs is the person who provided the most damaging information about the work being done in Oak Ridge, gaseous diffusion and electromagnetic separation of uranium. His information, confirmed by George Koval when he was assigned to Site X, convinced the Soviet Union to select a plutonium based atomic bomb. Yet, I can find nothing to show that he was ever in Oak Ridge.

I hope you have enjoyed this series on spies and Oak Ridge. It has been fun to research and helped me to put the whole issue of espionage in better perspective.

I also recall the time when two former FBI agents who were assigned to Y-12 during the Manhattan Project walked beside me while I was giving a tour in 2005 and proceeded to inform me of their experiences. Amazing is all I can say.

They were sent to Oak Ridge to see if there was sabotage involved in the failure of the Calutrons when they were first started up in Alpha 1. I asked them what they learned. Their response was, "No, we did not find any sabotage, but we continued to work in Y-12 until the end of the war." No one ever suspected that they were FBI agents.

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Al Slack, sold information from Eastman Kodak and Holston Ordinance Works, but I am unsure what Manhattan Project information from Oak Ridge he might have provided the Soviet Union, although he was in Oak Ridge