

The Secret Documents

A writer takes a certain risk when he invites his readers to examine his secret archives, like a reporter opening up his notebook. Why did I focus on this event and ignore that one? Stress one aspect and play down another? Because that's the way I saw it. When you read my book, you're invited inside my head, which is stuffed with history, interviews, memories, and my personal prejudices. When you look at my sources, you watch the world alongside me and are certain to see it differently. So these archives may be the spine of the story, but not the flesh.

This said, there is also a certain enjoyment in reading official documents, like reading other people's mail. That is exactly what is happening in the letter from Friedrich Schwend to Julius Mader in Section 6 ("The Money Launderers"). But beware, this letter was sent from a swindler and unreconstructed Nazi to an East German propagandist. Each had his own agenda, just as any author has his--which is to make readers see reality in his terms. And don't think for an instant that many of these internal memoranda were kept secret for decades to shield unchallengeable facts from the public. Quite the contrary, many are weapons in bureaucratic battles. The pleasure in reading them comes from entering a vanished world, frozen in time and preserved on paper. I have tried to restore them to life, but in my own way.

The selection on line represents at most one-tenth of the documents I gathered with the invaluable expertise of Margaret Shannon of Washington Historical Research. We've picked out the ones that seemed most intriguing or, in the case of the McNally Report, most comprehensive. But actually finding them is like a game of three-dimensional chess, and at this she is a grandmaster. To begin with, the archives are usually tucked away in the suburbs outside Washington or London or Paris, and they are

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not always easy to find. When you do, you can't just walk in and say: "Please let us see your files on Operation Bernhard." The response to such an impertinent request would be a stern archivist's finger pointing to a now-computerized index. What department was grappling with the counterfeits at the time? It's easy to find the British Treasury file on "Suggested Distribution by plane of forged German currency notes over Germany" (T 160/1332), especially after the British government's cabinet office economic historian advised me to look there. But who would have thought that copies of important documents would be sitting in the files of the Bank of England's Printing Works?--the equivalent of the U.S. Treasury's Bureau of Printing and Engraving. And how would you find a needle named Friedrich Schwend in the still incompletely sorted haystack of eight million recently declassified files on war crimes?

Fortunately, one of those engaged in that monumental task was our friend Bob Wolfe, a historian who fought as a young infantry officer in both the Pacific and Europe until seriously wounded in the final assault on Germany. Oh, you speak German? they said. The Army transferred him to civil administration, and then he spent much of his working life at the U.S. National Archives as guardian of the Nazi files captured by his comrades. Years later, he negotiated their return to the democratic state of what was then West Germany, but not before copies were made for scholars, history buffs, and writers like me. Bob was our own Virgil through the inner circles of archival hell.

Nothing about going through trunks of old letters in the attic is easy, straightforward, or even neat and clean. Hands and clothes get smudged with dust, the brain reels at the irrelevance and sheer banality of so many pieces of paper, like Aunt Em's postcard from Niagara Falls or the visit of the Turkish ambassador to the State

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Department's Office of International Economic Affairs to discuss the appearance of counterfeit pounds in Turkey. (No one could know then that the ambassador's son would one day become a pop record millionaire.) So if you like to explore lost worlds, this is the place for you--bearing in mind that history never repeats itself but that it often rhymes.

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—Lawrence Malkin