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The Greatest Traitor

Written by Roger Hermiston

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The Greatest Traitor

The Secret Lives
of
Agent George Blake

ROGER HERMISTON



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To Eileen

Author's Note

For simplicity's sake, I have described the Soviet Union's security and intelligence organisation as the KGB throughout the whole of this book. It is the name, the acronym, most familiar to the general reader – and in any case, the *functions* of the organisation remained constant from 1917–1991. However, at various times in its history it has been called the Cheka, NKVD, OGPU, NKGB, MGB and MVD.

Likewise on the British side, I have opted to refer to SIS, the Secret Intelligence Service, as opposed to MI6, the title which is perhaps more familiar to twenty-first century readers. SIS was the name used from around 1920 onwards, and is enshrined in statute today. MI6 became a 'flag of convenience' for SIS in the late 1930s, and entered common parlance from the Second World War onwards.

Foreword and Acknowledgements

My interest in George Blake was first stirred on Friday, 17 September 1999, when I came into the offices of BBC Radio 4's *Today* to edit the following morning's programme.

Remarkably, I had not one but two spy stories on the running order that evening: it was as if the Cold War had never gone away. The breaking news concerned a lecturer from a northern university who had been exposed for his work as a recruiting agent for the Stasi – the East German secret police – in the late 1970s. My team started putting in the calls to mould the revelation into our 8.10 a.m. lead – the slot on the programme reserved for the most significant, compelling story. While they set to work calling the Foreign Office and assorted espionage watchers, I settled back to consider our other spy tale.

I had in my hands the tape of an interview our foreign affairs reporter in London had conducted over the telephone earlier that day, on the line to Moscow. It was an undoubted coup: apart from a brief flurry of activity around the time of his autobiography, a decade earlier, the Cold War traitor George Blake was not known for speaking to the Western media.

As I listened, I found myself completely absorbed by his voice, which was so redolent of the 1950s, a time when it seemed that educated men spoke in more assertive, rounded fashion. I knew little about Blake then beyond the bold headlines of his life – that he was a Soviet spy who had sold a nation's secrets and been sentenced to an incredible

forty-two years in jail; that he had made a daring escape over the walls of Wormwood Scrubs and all the way to the Soviet capital.

That day we wanted to speak to Blake in his role as Cold War veteran, seeking his reaction to the unmasking, earlier that week, of 87-year-old Melita Norwood as a Soviet agent of some forty years standing. She had passed her KGB controller information about a top-secret project connected with the building of Britain's atomic bomb. In clipped, accented tones – those of a foreigner who has absorbed the English language well and can speak it almost too perfectly – Blake was effusive in his praise for the suburban pensioner, whom *The Times* had smartly dubbed 'The Spy Who Came in From the CO-OP'. Bracketing her with the 'atomic spies' – Donald Maclean, Klaus Fuchs, Morris Cohen, et al. – Blake told his interviewer: 'They were moved by higher considerations, because they firmly believed they were helping to save the world from an atomic holocaust, and so I think we all ought to be very grateful for what they had done.'

Asking his British audience to be 'grateful' to these characters was one thing; trying to persuade them that a member of the infamous Cambridge Five spy ring might be worthy of canonisation was quite another: 'I have known – and feel privileged to have known – a number of the atomic spies, and they're very good friends of mine, starting with Donald Maclean, and they are people of the highest character, indeed in some cases approaching saintliness; I don't hesitate to say that.'

Ten years after the Berlin Wall had been pulled down, Blake was still reluctant to budge from his ideological fastness. The failure of the Soviet Union, of Communism, was the fault of mankind not the system itself. 'Human beings are still too imperfect to build the perfect society,' was his assessment. It would arrive eventually, he maintained, but not for decades, even centuries.

Sure and unrepentant, the interview was certainly the most powerful item we had for the programme but, instead of giving it the hallowed 8.10 slot, I placed it at 8.40 a.m., separating it from the 'newsier' Stasi story. My editor Rod Liddle – whose instincts were invariably correct on these matters – rightly berated me afterwards for that decision.

In the coming years, I became fascinated with Blake and, as I learned more about him, I discovered an intriguing, flawed character, whose life had been played out against – and often at the heart of – some of the major events of the twentieth century. Twelve years later, once I had resolved to write about him, it was naturally incumbent on me to approach him for his version of the story. I telephoned him on the eve of his birthday in November 2011.

He had no warning of my call, despite a number of e-mails and letters which had all mysteriously gone astray. Most politely, he declined to be interviewed. He had written his own autobiography, and several other books, and said he had nothing more to add to what was already on record. He told me he felt in good health for his age, although his eyesight was steadily fading, to the point where he could no longer read or write, except to sign his name. For a man with a passion for literature and languages, this must be a bitter degeneration.

What he did agree to do was answer by e-mail, with his son acting as intermediary, some specific questions of fact about his life. The arrangement worked very smoothly for a number of months, until I began to probe the roles played by his various KGB handlers in the 1950s. Then the answers dried up.

This, then, is no authorised biography, but, through fresh interviews with those who knew Blake, previously unseen papers from his trial, and valuable material in British and German archives, I have been able to piece together what I hope is an authentic and revealing portrait of an astonishing life lived through remarkable times.

There has been no assistance from the present-day Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). Blake's file – like all the others – remains under lock and key, and the Service, unlike MI5, is not a participant in the regular Freedom of Information process. In 2010, it did commission Professor Keith Jeffery to write a history of its activities up to 1949, and it has released a limited amount of other material for 'biographies of important intelligence figures'. But by 'important', they mean, of course, heroic and worthy, and Blake is not considered either, hence the story of his treachery

is something the Service would rather forget. One very senior former officer I contacted for assistance replied tersely that he had ‘absolutely no enthusiasm for facilitating books about George Blake (of whatever type)’. I became used to this kind of response.

Despite that reaction, outside the intelligence community, there is an enduring fascination with Blake. Indeed, as I began to delve deeper into his life, I discovered that some of our leading film directors, novelists and playwrights had all trodden the path before me.

Blake inspired films by both John Huston and Alfred Hitchcock. The former’s 1973 thriller *The Mackintosh Man* features the escape from prison of a KGB mole (played by Ian Bannen), alongside Paul Newman as a British intelligence officer. Hitchcock’s *The Short Night*, had it ever been made, would have featured a British spy and traitor, Gavin Brand, escaping over the wall from Wormwood Scrubs prison. The screenplay had all the hallmarks of a classic Hitchcock thriller, even featuring a *Psycho*-like scene with an attempt to kill the heroine in a gas-filled sauna. Unfortunately, the director died just months after the script was completed and the project was cancelled.

Blake has also inspired several novels, notably Ted Allbeury’s *Shadow of Shadows* (1983), in which the former secret agent meshes Blake’s complete life story (thinly disguised) with the tale of SIS agent James Lawler’s attempt to track down the missing Russian defector Colonel Petrov. A decade later, Ian McEwan gave a forbidding, suspicious Blake a substantial walk-on part in his 1990 novel *The Innocent*, the story of a twisted love affair set against the backdrop of spy-ridden Berlin in the 1950s.

Finally, there is the theatre: in his 1995 play *Cell Mates*, Simon Gray chronicles the volatile relationship between Blake (first played by Stephen Fry) and his co-conspirator Sean Bourke (Rik Mayall) in Wormwood Scrubs.

Blake’s life could yet provide stories for many more films, novels and plays. Even before his defining years as spy and traitor, he performed a variety of roles: teenage courier with the Dutch Resistance; fugitive in

occupied Europe; promising intelligence officer in Germany at the onset of the Cold War; and stoical captive at the hands of Communists in Korea.

His close confidante in jail, Kenneth de Courcy, assessed Blake's character in a way that is both troubling and difficult to dismiss: 'He was really three quite separate personalities. One was charming, witty, good natured and kind. The second was despairing, pessimistic, defeatist, while the third man was cruel, ruthless and without regard to personal or any other loyalty.'

How those different personalities manifested themselves, how they developed, and to what different ends Blake put them are the subjects this book seeks to examine. In his spy's 'wardrobe of disguises', how did the various cloaks Blake wore enable him to survive and prosper?

For survive he certainly did. Blake turned ninety in November 2012 and now lives out a comfortable retirement outside Moscow on a KGB pension, honoured as one of the major figures of Russian foreign intelligence, and held in high esteem by none other than President Vladimir Putin. Both men are products of an era in which Europe – indeed the entire world – was divided and carved up by two implacably opposed and warring ideologies. The Cold War required cold warriors – men and women who lurked in shadows, dealt in lies, half-truths and disinformation, and lived on the conflict's psychological and ideological frontline.

It also demanded belief. Blake, however deplorable his actions and choices might appear, remains a rare living specimen of a type that is almost lost to history: the principled traitor. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had to delve back to the 1570s, to the young Catholic priests who plotted against Queen Elizabeth I, to find a satisfactory historical parallel to the intensity of faith and certainty of political ideology that he attributed to Blake.

And judged purely on the length of the sentence handed down to him at his trial, Blake might also lay claim to another title: the greatest traitor. Surely that unprecedented forty-two-year punishment, together with the Lord Chief Justice's conclusion that the spy had left the nation's intelligence service in tatters, is testament to a truly destructive betrayal?

Over in Moscow the ‘honorific’ certainly sits well. Recent years have seen a full-length dramatization of his life and a special documentary to celebrate his 90th birthday. In the pantheon of Soviet spies, he commands a seat at the top table, along with the likes of Second World War heroes Richard Sorge and Rudolph Abel.

It is true, of course, that Blake’s nine years as a mole for the KGB never involved giving away the ultimate secret – the atomic bomb – as Klaus Fuchs did. It is arguable too that Kim Philby, in his more exalted position within SIS, caused greater quality of damage – if not quantity – than the middle-ranking Blake. Moreover, it has never been proven that his betrayal led to loss of life.

From this perspective then, his sentence might appear more a vindictive punishment than a carefully measured one; a late act of retribution borne out of the frustration of the political class at yet another in a long line of traitors who bedevilled British Intelligence in the 1950s and 1960s.

In that scenario Blake becomes something of a scapegoat. A confessed traitor, but also an outsider made to pay for the failings of a secretive establishment then in its death throes. As we shall see, there were certainly those who reached – and were prepared to act on – this interpretation at the time.

George Blake’s life has touched many in the intelligence world and beyond it, for good or ill. Despite the passing of time I have managed to talk to a number of those who knew him, and there are two to whom I am especially indebted.

Lord Hutchinson of Lullington – then Jeremy Hutchinson – represented Blake at his trial in 1961, and details of his eloquent defence that day in May can be read for the first time in this book. He was most helpful in his recollections of Blake, and also described vividly to me the forces arraigned against him as a new QC fighting his client’s case in the Old Bailey more than half a century ago.

Michael Randle, a longstanding peace campaigner, believed Blake’s sentence to be inhumane, and the remarkable story of how he assisted

his former prison companion is told in detail here. His own riveting book, *The Blake Escape*, was one of those that helped guide my chapters on Blake's time in prison, in hiding, and then of course on the dramatic journey across the Iron Curtain. Randle generously gave me access to some of his private papers and to a gripping chapter in another of his books, the as yet unpublished *Rebel Verdict*, an account of his 1991 trial on charges of helping Blake escape.

Michael's wife Anne was also most helpful, especially with memories of those days in the winter of 1966. The Randles may not share all my conclusions about their friend but I trust their own actions and views are faithfully represented here.

I also owe a special debt of gratitude to Tom Bower, acclaimed investigative journalist and writer, who was one of the first to interview Blake in depth back in 1990. The results were broadcast in an absorbing BBC *Inside Story* documentary, 'The Confession'. Not only did I watch the film, but buried away in a couple of boxes in Tom's garage were several hours of 'raw' tapes – a good deal of the interview with Blake, and others with his colleagues and friends, that had to be left on the cutting room floor. I have made full use of those recordings in this book, and they have provided invaluable insights into my subject and his times.

Ben Birnberg represented Blake for a while in his battle for his book royalties against the British Government. He was most generous in giving me access to all the legal documents associated with the case.

Leopold Van Ewijk talked to me very movingly and compellingly about the role his wife Greetje played in the Dutch underground and, in particular, the vital part she played in ushering young George Blake (then Behar) across the border and on the first leg of his journey across Europe.

Louis Wesseling learned Arabic alongside Blake on a course in Shemlan, Lebanon, in 1960–61, and his very clear memories of their association and their conversations are recorded in these pages.

There are also several former SIS officers who have been most helpful with their recollections of Blake and his times, but they have asked to remain anonymous.

While researching and writing this book, I regularly attended the stimulating seminars hosted by Professor Christopher Andrew, an authority on intelligence and espionage, at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. I am most grateful to him. Through the wisdom of the guest speakers and the quality of the ensuing conversation, those sessions helped me build up a far deeper knowledge of the intelligence world.

Also from Cambridge University, I must thank Professor Jonathan Haslam, an expert on the Cold War – especially from the Soviet side – who has been a source of valuable suggestions and insights into some of the characters and events depicted in this book.

There are many other people who I must thank for advice and assistance and stories about Blake and his times, including Gordon Corera, Alan Judd, Tennent ‘Pete’ Bagley, Phillip Knightley, Ian McEwan, David Cornwell, Anthony Cavendish, Oliver Miles, Colin Cohen, Alain Gresh, Sylvie Braibant, Professor Keith Jeffery, Martin Coubert, Adri Wijnen, and ‘Shorty’ Eastabrook.

I am greatly indebted to Abby D’Arcy Hughes, who unearthed vital new information about Blake’s time in Berlin. Elke Piron’s researches into his early years in Holland were equally invaluable, while Nvard Chalikyan provided immaculate translations of Russian newspapers, books and films in which Blake featured. My friends Conny Loosen and Rita Cillessen contributed some important additional German and Dutch translation.

My agent Andrew Gordon has been a continuing source of encouragement and guidance. Ray Newman was a splendid copy editor, assiduous in locating errors in the text and equally creative when suggesting improvements. Finally, last but certainly not least, Sam Harrison has been the ideal editor, always full of the soundest advice on content and style, all done in the most constructive and helpful manner.

Roger Hermiston,
Cavendish,
January 2013.

‘What do you think spies are: priests, saints and martyrs? They’re a squalid procession of vain fools, traitors too, yes: pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play Cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives.’

Alec Leamas in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*

by John le Carré

‘It is the spy who has been called upon to remedy the situation created by the deficiencies of ministers, diplomats, generals and priests . . . we do not have to develop, like the Parliamentarians conditioned by a lifetime, the ability to produce the ready phrase, the smart reply and the flashing smile. And so it is not surprising these days that the spy finds himself the main guardian of intellectual integrity.’

George Young, Vice-Chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, as reported by George Blake

‘Blake asserted he had yielded to no material pressure or advantages but had been genuinely “converted to Communism while a prisoner of war in Korea”. With the ideological spy, we were faced with a phenomenon such as had hardly appeared in these islands for some four hundred years.’

Harold Macmillan, *At the End of the Day: 1961–63*

Prologue

**Central Criminal Court, London,
11.40 a.m., Wednesday, 3 May 1961**

For more than half a century, No. 1 Court at the Old Bailey had been the Grand Theatre of Crime, the stage on which the worst of humanity took a bow. Few who stepped into the dock in this intimate oak-panelled room, representing the fearsome infallibility of English justice, could dare to contemplate freedom when the curtain came down at the end of their inquisition. Its many famous players had included the likes of patent medicine salesman Dr Harvey Crippen, who poisoned his wife and buried her in the coal cellar, and John Reginald Christie, the clerk who strangled at least eight women at 10 Rillington Place.

But in the Cold War, intelligence became the most dangerous weapon, and the court found itself dealing with a different kind of criminal – the betrayers of the nation’s secrets. Klaus Fuchs, the theoretical physicist who gave the Soviets comprehensive plans for the atomic bomb, was one of the first of this new breed, convicted in March 1950 and sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment. Just two months previously, Court No. 1 had played host to the Portland Spy Ring – Gordon Lonsdale, Henry Houghton, Ethel Gee and Peter and Helen Kroger – who had all been handed substantial jail terms for passing details of Britain’s nuclear submarine fleet across the Iron Curtain.

Never in anyone’s memory, however, had such strict security measures been imposed on a criminal trial in peacetime as were put in place at the Old Bailey on 3 May 1961. Outside, dozens of police cordoned off the pavement, allowing no one near the building.

Inside, a 38-year-old ‘Government official’ who had already confessed to his crimes listened intently as the judge, Lord Chief

Justice Lord Parker, brought his summing-up to a conclusion and prepared to pass sentence. George Blake, a handsome man of dark complexion, with his brown hair fashionably long, was dressed smartly in a grey suit, checked shirt and blue silk tie with red dots. His hands gripped the ledge of the dock.

Little had been known about Blake before he entered the courtroom that May morning. A number of brief appearances in magistrates' court had disclosed something of the gravity of the charges facing him, but details of exactly who he was and what he had done remained scant and obscure. The newspaper reporters in court learned precious little more. The details of his profession were skirted around in open session, and the prosecuting counsel, Attorney-General Sir Reginald Manningham-Buller, merely referred to the fact that until his arrest Blake had been 'employed in the Government's service both in this country and overseas'. Fleeting mention was made of his five-year service in the Royal Navy. Although those present with sharp memories might have recalled that, back in April 1953, he had been one of the first prisoners set free by the Communists towards the end of the Korean War. They might also have remembered the sight of he and his fellow captives arriving to a heroes' welcome in front of the TV cameras at Brize Norton airfield.

At 10.40 a.m., the court had gone into closed session, and Lord Parker had ordered No. 1 Court to be locked and the shutters to be put up on the glass-panelled doors. What there was to know about George Blake – his life story, the details of his career – was laid out by his defence in private, only adding to the air of mystery surrounding him.

The court had been open for the prosecution speech and was re-opened for the Judge's summing-up. Of the detail of his offences, there was only the broadest outline but, in Blake's own words, the enormity of his crimes was made abundantly clear. Manningham-Buller had quoted the heart of Blake's confession back at him: 'I must freely admit there was not an official document of any importance to which I had access which was not passed to my Soviet contact.'

Lord Parker's opening remarks in his summing-up offered little comfort: 'It is clear your case is akin to treason. Indeed, it is one of the worst that can be envisaged other than in a time of war . . . your conduct in many other countries would undoubtedly carry the death penalty. In our law, however, I have no option but to sentence you to imprisonment, and for your traitorous conduct extending over so many years there must be a very heavy sentence.'

Blake feared the worst – fourteen years in prison, as had been handed down to Fuchs. He fervently hoped it might be ten, perhaps eleven, but he had few grounds for optimism. Throughout the trial to that point, he had felt more like a spectator, or a filmgoer, content to sit and watch as others played out another man's drama. Now, though, Parker's ominous words demanded his attention: 'The court cannot, even if so minded, give you a sentence of life imprisonment . . . there are, however, five counts to which you have pleaded guilty, each dealing with separate periods in your life during which you were betraying your country, and the court will impose upon you a sentence of fourteen years imprisonment on each of those counts.'

Even then, Blake and everyone else in No.1 Court had no reason to expect what was to come. In the natural order of these matters, surely the sentences would run *concurrently*, meaning he would serve fourteen years. Parker delivered the hammer blow: 'Those in respects of counts one, two and three being *consecutive*, those in respect of counts four and five concurrent. Accordingly, the total sentence upon you is one of forty-two years imprisonment.'

A communal gasp sounded from the spectators in the gallery, followed by a moment of shocked silence. As they glanced towards the prisoner in the dock for his reaction, they noticed a flicker of a smile play across his lips as he stood still, uncomprehending, gazing directly at Lord Parker. After some seven or eight seconds, Blake turned around slowly, taking in the faces around the court, first those on the press bench, then those on the solicitors' table, and finally those with a professional interest who gazed down from the prime seats in the gallery.

Then, escorted by a warder, Blake hesitantly crossed the wooden floor of the dock. He leaned over and whispered courteously to his defence team: 'Thank you.' He then disappeared from view, descending to the cells below.

Forty-two years in jail: a record. The previous longest consecutive sentence in British criminal history dated from 1887 when a man was jailed for twenty-nine years for demanding money with menaces and robbery with violence. The severity of the punishment led Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to reflect in his diary: 'The Lord Chief Justice has passed a savage sentence – forty-two years in prison! Naturally, we can say nothing.'

Forty-two years, and almost no one knew exactly what Blake had done to deserve it.

Among the friends and colleagues with whom he had endured the miseries of the Korean prison camps, there was disbelief. To them, he had been the epitome of bravery and defiance; a man worthy of implicit trust. Commissioner Herbert Lord of the Salvation Army told the *Daily Mirror's* reporter: 'I find it almost impossible to believe that the George Blake I saw kneel nonchalantly in the snow as a North Korean guard beat him with a rifle butt could have turned into a traitor . . . For that was only one of many times the young vice-consul, who was my fellow prisoner for thirty-four months, showed contempt for the Communists.'

Yet as reporters began to uncover the other side of George Blake, the quietly brave, charming man beyond the headlines screaming 'TRAITOR', one or two of the testimonials hinted at something else. Philip Deane, the Greek-born *Observer* journalist, who, like Herbert Lord, had suffered side by side with Blake in North Korea, said his friend 'had Walter Mitty dreams, always seeing himself knighted or consecrated bishop for some service to the state or God'. Was this daydreaming merely a harmless, introspective habit, indulged during the long hours suffered in the hothouse psychology of the prison camp? Or had it developed into something more than a dream? A temptation to play the great spy in the secret power play of the Cold War?

Clues as to what had driven Blake's treachery could be found in Jeremy Hutchinson's eloquent speech of mitigation, though, at the time, neither the Press or the public were allowed to hear it. His client's life, the QC said, had been almost wholly forged in the conflicts and upheavals of the twentieth century. From the age of sixteen Blake had known little else but constant clandestine activity, since he immersed himself in 'war, deprivation, murder and suchlike'. Hutchinson had told the closed court Blake's extraordinary life story – a story that, to all intents and purposes, was now at an end.

Blake, however, had a final chapter in mind. As he left the Old Bailey that afternoon for Wormwood Scrubs, handcuffed to two prison officers in the back of a small van, he peered out of the window and saw the newspaper vendors carrying placards emblazoned with his photograph and sentence, and he made a vow to himself: he wouldn't stay in prison until 2003, when he would be 80 years old, whatever it took. Fourteen years he could have accepted, but forty-two appeared vengeful. To paraphrase Marx, he had nothing to lose but his chains.

He would escape.

1

A Question of Identity

George Blake was born George Behar, in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands. His mother Catherine Gertrui (née Beijderwellen) gave birth on 11 November 1922, at 3 p.m. In a life that would be shaped by confused identity and shifting loyalty, what happened next was surely a portent of things to come.

His mother and father discussed what to call their son and had reached an easy decision: two grandfathers on either side of the family were called Jacob, so the baby boy would carry that name in memory of both. But, on leaving his wife and infant son that afternoon to walk to the town hall in Rotterdam to declare the birth, Albert William Behar had time to think, free of family constraints.

It was Armistice Day, just four years after the end of The Great War in which he had fought. Despite his own rather mysterious origins, Albert was then a patriotic Briton: he decided there could be no more appropriate name on that auspicious day than George, in honour of king (George V) and country. The registrar was duly informed.

It was an uncommon name for a Dutch boy, and Albert quickly discovered that his impulsive act was scorned by little George's

conservative and parodial relatives: instead, they would always prefer to call him by his Dutch nickname, Poek.

A few years later as little George started to read, the first book with which he was presented was the illustrated *Children's Bible*. Heroes like Abraham and Isaac, David and Saul, and Samson stirred his imagination. But above all, the character he enjoyed most, and with whom he most closely identified, was Jacob – the biblical source of his intended name.

The Behar family home was at 104, Gedempte Botersloot, in Rotterdam, one of the city's oldest and wealthiest streets. By the time Albert and his family took up residence there it had undergone major development, but without losing its air of affluence. The year after George's birth the Behars moved into the vacant house next door, No. 102, where there was more space. Their second child, Adele Gertrud, was born there in June 1924, and the family moved soon afterwards to an even bigger residence at 40c Spengensekade, an equally respectable address. There, Catherine gave birth to their second daughter, Elizabeth, in August 1925.

It seemed an entirely conventional middle-class life, but their road to this destination had been a rocky one, and their union was anything but commonplace.

Both sets of parents had frowned upon the relationship. The Beijderwellens were very reluctant to see their daughter marrying a somewhat exotic man whose past seemed cloaked in mystery, however charming he might have been: a Dutchman with solid bourgeois credentials would have been their preference. And the wealthy Behar family, for reasons that would only become clear many years later, warned Albert, quite straightforwardly, that if he married this Dutch girl he would be cut off without a penny.

Catherine Beijderwellen was 26 at the time of her marriage – tall, fair-haired, and vivacious. She came from a conventional, well-established Rotterdam family with deep Protestant roots, although they were actually members of the minority Remonstrant Church. She knew

little about her fiancée. She thought Behar was an English surname and understood that Albert was British, though she knew he had been born in Cairo, and that his family still lived there. His origins did not matter: she was under the spell of this dark, handsome man whose romantic image was only enhanced by shrapnel wounds on his face sustained in the First World War. An unreliable outsider in one light, he was undoubtedly a heroic figure in another.

Albert had constructed a stirring narrative of the life he had lived before meeting Catherine. He claimed to have studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, to have served in the French Foreign Legion, and then, in the First World War, to have won the Military Cross and the French Croix de Guerre. Other accounts of his life have even had him serving on Field Marshal Haig's Intelligence Staff.

Although a good deal of this story had the ring of truth, certain parts were undoubtedly embroidered, and one or two others would later fail to stand up to examination. It only becomes possible to clearly separate fact from fiction in Albert's life when looking at what he did in the First World War, where his full service record reveals the less glamorous, though no less heroic, experience of an 'ordinary' soldier.

Enlisting in France in 1915, he served as a driver and motorcycle despatch rider on the Western Front. He was, indeed, seriously wounded, sustaining a fractured back and skull and contusions to his face and hands. Such injuries certainly resemble the damage that might have been caused by an exploding shell, but his service notes include the word 'acc', suggesting that the wounds were accidentally incurred. Either way, he was evacuated to England for treatment on 25 May 1918. While recovering in hospital in London, he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for gallantry and commendable war service.

Albert's last posting with what was by then called the Royal Army Service Corps was to Rotterdam, in December 1918. It was early in the following year, as he helped the British Expeditionary Force wind down its wartime operations, that he met Catherine.

Despite unanswered questions about his background and her family's disapproval, the marriage went ahead. Given their strength of purpose, Albert and Catherine felt they had little choice but to elope and so headed for London, a city Albert knew well after spending time there recuperating after his wartime exploits. The wedding ceremony took place at Chelsea Registry Office on Monday, 16 January 1922. The certificate shows that they both listed 11 Markham Square – just 300 yards away – as their residence at the time of the marriage. Two men named G. Challis and A.J. Grimes – Army colleagues of Albert – were noted as the witnesses.

The Behars' opposition to that marriage would remain total. They would have little or no contact with their son and his growing family for the next thirteen years. The Beijderwellens, however, were gradually worn down. They were reconciled with Catherine and accepted Albert before George was born.

The new arrival quickly became the subject of great attention from his many aunts and uncles. His favourite companion was Aunt Truss, his mother's unmarried youngest sister, who held a good job with an established Dutch bank. On long weekend walks, she would regale him with interesting tales of her workplace, skilfully imitating the speech and mannerisms of her colleagues and keeping young George endlessly amused.

Albert, meanwhile, had a secret and meant to keep it. The battle he had fought to persuade Catherine's parents to accept him was difficult enough, and he felt – almost certainly correctly – that to disclose the nature of his true self to them would still have disastrous consequences. Having listed his religion as Roman Catholic for the British Army, he now promptly declared he was Evangelical Lutheran when registering for citizenship in Rotterdam.

Initially Albert relied on two sources of income to provide a comfortable life for his family. One was his Army pension, but the other – more significant – came from his Turkish railway bonds. Those were rendered worthless, however, when Kemal Atatürk's government

nationalised the railway industry in 1927. For several years, Albert ran a store selling leather and sports goods down in the Leuvenhaven, one of Rotterdam's oldest harbours. Then, in 1928, he decided to open a small factory – from the ground floor of his house – making leather gloves for the longshoremen in the port. That venture was barely underway when it was hit hard by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the subsequent worldwide recession. Little work was taking place in the shipyards, and the widespread laying off of workers had a perilous knock-on effect for small businesses like Albert's.

George's aunt's husband, who was a grain dealer, went bankrupt at this time. 'Like several other ruined and embittered middle-class people my aunt and uncle began to look towards National Socialism for salvation,' Blake recalled. 'At home the daily conversation centred around the ups and downs of business, the difficulties of paying creditors, how many people and who should be sacked and kept on, whether there were signs that things were getting better or, on the contrary, worse.'

Albert's business struggled on even as his health began to deteriorate. He was having difficulties with his lungs, perhaps related to the effects of mustard gas from the battlefields of the First World War. Whatever the reason, the family doctor advised that a move away from smoky, grimy Rotterdam to an environment with cleaner, fresher air might do the patient some good. When, in 1933, an opportunity arose to move to Scheveningen, a pleasant seaside resort not far from The Hague, the Behars eagerly grasped it, settling into a villa at No. 4 Maasstraat, close to the impressive Kurhaus, the luxury hotel and concert venue.

To sit down at the dinner table in the Behar home in the early 1930s would have been an entertaining yet puzzling experience. Albert was fluent in English and French, usually opting to speak the former as he continued to uphold the image he had created of himself as a British entrepreneur. He did not speak Dutch, however, and stubbornly refused to learn the mother tongue of his wife and children. Catherine knew a little English and could communicate well enough

with her husband, but George and his sisters – although just starting to learn both French and English at school – did not share a common language with their father. Albert would effectively remain a stranger in a foreign land, an attitude no doubt partially responsible for the failure of his successive businesses.

To his children he seemed a remote, otherworldly figure. When he was working, he would set off early in the morning and not arrive home in the evenings until after 8 p.m. when they had gone to bed. On Sunday, his only day off, he would usually choose to stay at home and read while George and his sisters would be taken for a walk by their mother and aunt. He left most of the care of his children, material and spiritual, to Catherine, and retreated into the background. When he did turn his attention to them, he invariably spoiled them with spontaneous gifts and presents.

Nonetheless, the young Blake inherited his father's intellectual curiosity and sense of adventure. When growing up in Rotterdam, he was inspired by the famous statue of one of the city's notable sons, Erasmus, which he could see from his window. The philosopher is depicted holding a book, and George was assured he would turn a page each time the clock on the nearby church struck the hour. The little boy believed the story and spent much time pleasantly anticipating the event.

As well as reading – he particularly enjoyed stories from the Bible, and books on Dutch history – George's imagination was stirred by thoughts of life in foreign lands. He would spend many hours on his own wandering the quayside at the port of Rotterdam, watching the ships come in from all over the world and observing the diverse cargo being unloaded – timber from Russia, spices from India, coffee from Brazil.

Dina Regoort, a long-serving maid to the Behar family, remembered him as a quiet, polite, somewhat solitary boy. 'I always felt he was apart and rather sad,' she said. 'He had no friends of his own age, and he did not play with his schoolmates or other boys.'

Instead he preferred to act out games of fantasy in his own home, often persuading his reluctant sisters Adele and Elizabeth to join him. One family snapshot of the time shows him in Arab dress, another in the guise of an admiral. In one game, dressed in an old black gown belonging to his grandmother, he would be a minister of the church addressing his congregation (his sisters). In another, he would place an old black hat on his head and pretend to be the judge presiding over a courtroom. Dina would often be called upon to play the prisoner in the dock – more often than not accused of serious crimes.

In 1935, Albert Behar's failing health took a turn for the worse. Lung cancer was diagnosed and, after a period of many months confined to his bed at home, he was transferred to a hospital in The Hague. George, who was in his first year at the municipal Gymnasium, went to see his father every day after school. One particular visit left an abiding and disquieting memory.

He was lying in a cubicle with curtains around it, which were usually open. One day, as I was sitting at his bedside, he asked me to close the curtain. Somehow I just could not make out exactly what it was he wanted, however much I tried. The more I tried, the less I understood. He got angry with me and I felt desperate and was almost in tears . . . Fortunately, the man in the next cubicle who, being ill himself probably understood him better, told me what he wanted and all was well. But I shall never forget this experience, especially as he died shortly afterwards.

Albert Behar died on 6 April 1936, aged 46, leaving his family in dire financial straits. His faltering business went bankrupt almost immediately, and after all the outstanding debts had been paid off, there was little money for his wife and her three children to live on. Catherine took on lodgers in the villa, and cooked meals for office girls in Scheveningen. The family just about kept their heads above

water until help arrived from an unexpected quarter, accompanied by the truth about Albert's origins, which he had successfully concealed for so many years.

Albert had had little, if any, contact with his well-off relations in Egypt after he had defied their wishes in 1922. However, before he died, he told his wife that if she found herself unable to cope, and was worried about the welfare and education of the children, she should contact his sister Zephira in Cairo. Catherine duly did so, receiving a reply that astonished her, and placed her in something of a dilemma. Albert, it transpired, was Jewish.

The Behars could trace their Jewish ancestry back to the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century. Their ancestors were among an estimated 200,000 who were forced to find new lives in North Africa and Europe when the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella issued the Alhambra Decree – expelling all Jews who would not convert from Christianity – in 1492. Many of these Sephardic Jews (*Sefarad* is the Hebrew name for Spain) found a safe haven in the Ottoman Empire. In an atmosphere of tolerance for religious minorities for which the Sultans were renowned, the Behars and others quickly flourished, fashioning livelihoods as artisans, doctors and intellectuals.

The status of Jews in the Netherlands in the 1920s was very different, however. Though overt anti-Semitism was less prevalent than in other parts of Europe, there were few Jews (only around 1.4 per cent of the population) and little widespread interaction between Jewish people and others. Albert was not religious and kept his ethnicity secret, eschewing all contact with Jewish organisations and Jewish cultural life, rather than belong to a minority.

All this was surprising enough for Catherine, but Zephira's letter also offered assistance, with conditions. She and her husband, a wealthy banker blind since birth, would help, but not by offering money. Instead, they proposed to take George off his mother's hands for a few years and give him a home with them, along with a good education in Cairo.

Catherine was in a quandary. She did not want to lose her son but the financial pressures bearing down on her were great. She also recognised this as a unique opportunity for George to expand his horizons beyond provincial Holland. He was a gifted boy and Cairo, famed as a great classical city of learning, could be the making of him.

‘I was torn. I was very much attached to my home, my Dutch relatives . . . and the thought of leaving them for the home of an unknown aunt and uncle, whose language I did not speak, frightened me,’ Blake recalled. ‘On the other hand, I was strongly attracted by the prospect of travelling to a far and exotic country and the entirely new life and adventures which awaited me there. It was this thirst for adventure and the unknown that proved the stronger and, after a few days of thought, I told my mother I would like to go.’

Two months later, on a bright September morning in 1936, 13-year-old George boarded a Norwegian cargo ship bound for Alexandria. There is a picture of him taken on that day on the quayside, smartly-dressed in his plus fours suit, flanked by his mother, grandmother and two sisters. Adele and Elizabeth are wreathed in smiles, while Catherine – a little nervous-looking – has an affectionate arm round her son’s shoulder.

George himself looks confident enough, as if emboldened by his first trip abroad, a journey to one of the countries of his imagination. Indeed, in the fortnight’s voyage that followed, he relished the company and the guidance of his shipmates and, by the time the boat docked in Egypt, he was more than ready to confront any challenges the world abroad might present.

For the next two years, George lived in conditions of great comfort at No. 42 Gabalaya Street – otherwise known in Cairo as ‘Villa Curiel’, after the family name of his aunt’s husband, Daniel Curiel. This lavish mansion stood in the most fashionable suburb of the Egyptian capital, far removed from the earthy, dirty city streets. It was situated at the northern tip of the Island of Zamalek, between two branches

of the River Nile and right alongside the famous Gezira Sporting Club, sanctuary of the British occupation. Effectively, a small palace with seventeen rooms, it was surrounded by a large park planted with palms and bushes. Exquisite tapestries and rare paintings hung on the walls, and the floors were covered with oriental carpets and rugs. The view over the Nile from the second floor was among the very best in the city.

George's first year in Cairo was a miserable one. His uncle and aunt decided to send him to a French school so he could become fluent in the language of choice for the Middle East's educated classes. At the Lycée he was alienated from his peers, surrounded by rich Egyptian boys, most of them older, who spoke Arabic outside the classroom.

Only when he was moved to the English School in 1937 did he begin to settle down in his new surroundings. This establishment resembled a traditional English public school, with prefects, morning prayers and corporal punishment, although most of the pupils were 'day boys' rather than boarders. George's first school report clearly demonstrated that he had now found his feet. 'His work has given satisfaction in all subjects,' wrote his form master, 'and promises well for the future'. His aptitude for languages and application in his lessons were praised fulsomely. With the benefit of hindsight, however, the school motto now seems singularly inappropriate for this particular alumnus from the Class of '37: *Ducit amor patriae* – Patriotism is our guide.

Once settled in the English School and getting to grips with the English language, George started going to the American Reformed Church, whose services were similar to those of the Dutch Church. Later he would visit the Anglican cathedral, much moved by the beauty of the liturgy. Back in the villa, he discovered a French Bible in his uncle's library and read a chapter of it, morning and night.

Surprisingly, perhaps, his Jewish relations never seriously attempted to convert him to their religion. At this stage, anyway, George had taken his newfound identity in his stride. 'The fact that I had Jewish blood did not worry me,' he later maintained. 'On the contrary I was

rather proud of it. It seemed to me that I was now twice elect; once by birth through the promise made to Abraham and once by grace through redemption by the blood of Christ.'

Instead, any efforts to shape young George's views on life took political form. It was at Villa Curiel, a monument to wealth and privilege, that he received his first primer in the virtues of Communism. It came from his cousins, Daniel's two sons, Raoul, aged 24, and Henri, 23. Raoul had introduced his brother to the works of Marx and Lenin, and Henri had fast become a Communist in all but name. Tall, thin, with a serious, thoughtful look and an occasional dazzling smile, he took young George under his wing. They would have many long political and philosophical discussions in which Henri would try to persuade the teenage boy of the benefits of a Marxist society.

Blake has recognised the impact of those long conversations: 'Henri was a young man, very charming, very attractive and he held strong Communist views. They were a great influence on me, but I resisted them at that time because I was a very religious boy. But, with hindsight, many of Henri's views acted as a time-bomb.'

In the summer of 1939 George's academic progress was confirmed when he passed his end-of-term exams with flying colours, winning prizes for Latin and History. He was all set to sit for the London University matriculation examination the following spring and went home to Scheveningen for a holiday.

Then, just a week before he was due to return to Cairo, something happened which derailed not only George's future but that of the whole world: Hitler's troops marched into Poland.

George did return to Cairo, but the Beijderwellen family conferred in his absence. His uncle Anthony who lived in Gelderland, and with whom George had spent some time during recent vacations, advised his mother that, in these uncertain times, the boy should return home and be with them. George was brought back from Egypt in time for the autumn term. He enrolled as a pupil at the Dutch High School in Rotterdam, staying with his grandmother and aunt in a spacious,

three-storey house, while his mother and sisters continued to live at the villa in Scheveningen.

He was greatly relieved to be back in the Netherlands, and his academic progress continued apace. His schoolmates admired him in particular for his skill at languages, appreciating the help he was prepared to give them with their homework. He seemed to keep himself a little apart from the rest of the crowd, though, appearing introspective if not unsociable. 'To us lads brought up in the strict tradition of Dutch middle-class respectability, he was a somewhat exotic figure. He had travelled widely and mixed with important people,' recalled a fellow pupil, Henrik Dentre. 'He told us sometimes about his visits to the Pyramids and the Sphinx, the marvels of Luxor, sailing on the Nile, but he never boasted about it or bragged about his rich uncle in Cairo, or anything like that . . . He never had a close friend. I sat next to him for a long time, but we never became very close. It wasn't in George's nature to open up.'

At 16, George was a confident, self-contained boy. He was of medium height, dark and handsome, but looked much younger than his years. Spurning team games, he was nonetheless very fit, a good swimmer and a capable all-round athlete, especially proficient in gymnastics. His experiences abroad had matured him and he was far more at ease with adults than any of his contemporaries.

Beneath the surface, however, George's peripatetic childhood had left him in a confused state of mind, as he acknowledged much later in life: 'Looking back now, I am sure that I lived through an identity crisis in those years. Where did I belong? A Jewish cosmopolitan home, an English school, which reflected the glory of British imperial power of which I also felt a part, and in my heart, all the time, a longing for Holland and all things Dutch.'

After Hitler's march into Poland, a general mobilisation was ordered but still no one wanted to believe that the Führer had designs on the Netherlands, despite the fact that, six months earlier, intelligence that their country was in peril had reached the Dutch Government. Some German officers were uncomfortable with Hitler's plan to invade the

Low Countries and decided to leak details of it. One of them, Colonel Hans Oster, an *Abwehr* intelligence officer, even gave the Dutch military attaché in Berlin, Major Gijsbertus J. Sas, a precise date for *Fall Gelb* (the codename for the future attack on Holland). Oster's information, given in March 1939, turned out to be completely accurate, but was ignored.

Throughout the winter of 1939 and into the early months of 1940, when 'The Phoney War' was underway, the Dutch nation retained its misplaced sense of security. The country had not experienced war on its territory since the days of Napoleon more than a century ago, and the people's view of the Nazis was far more positive than elsewhere in Europe.

As in the First World War, the Netherlands had declared itself neutral, even though in September 1939 the New Holland Water (Defence) Line was ready and could be flooded at any moment for the protection of the western part of the country. It was arguably the only worthwhile defence, however, because the Netherlands boasted an army with no tanks and only eighteen armoured vehicles, while the artillery was still being pulled by horses. Most of the rifles were of 1890s vintage, and there were precious few hand grenades.

Operation Weserübung – the invasion of Denmark and Norway – on 9 April 1940 should have put the Dutch on alert, but nothing changed. Even their allies were by no means certain that the Nazis would invade. In his diary for 10 May 1940, Winston Churchill's Private Secretary, Jock Colville, recorded: 'Rab Butler tells me that the Secret Service told him yesterday that there was no chance of an invasion of the Netherlands: it was a feint.' But, even as he wrote that entry, at the end of a momentous day – one in which Churchill succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Britain's Prime Minister – the invasion was well underway. 'So much for our renowned foreign agents.'

The Luftwaffe destroyed much of the Dutch Air Force: airfields at De Kooy, Amsterdam-Schiphol and The Hague were hit hard, and just seventy Dutch aircraft remained. The Germans also dropped

paratroopers over Rotterdam to occupy the bridges across the River Maas, which linked the Southern with the Northern Netherlands. Dutch marines were holding out on several fronts but it already appeared to be a hopeless task.

At 8 a.m., four hours after the invasion had begun, George and his family, like everyone else in the country, gathered round their wireless set to hear the distinctive voice of the principal radio newsreader read out a proclamation from Queen Wilhelmina. It was a moving address, expressing anger that the German attack had not been preceded by a proper Declaration of War, and fury that Hitler had betrayed his 'solemn undertakings' over Holland's neutrality. For the young Blake, listening avidly to the Monarch's words, these were daunting yet exciting moments. As he looked out of the window he saw aircraft exchanging machine-gun fire, and could hear the sounds of explosions from the port. Everything in his life was about to change: he was ready to do his duty, whatever that might be.