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Polish Army officer's double life as a CIA

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The term "superstar" is never used when referring to someone in the hazy, secretive and mostly unacknowledged world of spies and espionage.

But if it were to be applied, Ryszard Kuklinski might be on the short list of Spy Superstars.

For nearly a decade, Kuklinski — a colonel in the Polish Army — led a double life: In addition to his duties as a high-ranking army officer, for more than nine years Kuklinski also covertly provided the United States with top-secret information — more than 40,000 pages worth — about the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, documents that included troop movements, bunker emplacements, weapons distribution and even plans for war. And he did it during the tumultuous Cold War era of the 1970s and 1980s. Kuklinski died in 2004, the same year a book about him by New York Times correspondent Benjamin Weiser was published.



Kuklinski



Weiser



Forden

Weiser first met Kuklinski in 1992, in a Central Intelligence Agency safe house. His book describes how Kuklinski's efforts helped to prevent war in Western Europe and ultimately played a part in bringing an end to the Cold War.

This week Weiser and retired CIA agent David Forden — who worked closely with Kuklinski during his time spying — spoke at St. Mary's College of Maryland. For almost two hours these men, whose appearance was sponsored by the college's Center for the Study of Democracy and The Patuxent Partnership, laid out the Kuklinski saga to a packed hall in the school's Daugherty-Palmer Commons.

When Kuklinski was 9 years

old in 1939, Weiser said, he saw the Nazis invade Poland. Later, as a teenager, Kuklinski worked in Nazi slave labor camps.

"He was smart, athletic and sensitive," Weiser said, "and he knew what it was like to live under Nazi oppression. Later, as an army officer, he saw the Soviet military again as someone else who was running his country, and he recognized that the Soviet war plan was offensive, not defensive."

Kuklinski saw that Poland stood to be at the epicenter of any nuclear war waged between the United States and the Soviet Union. And he knew Poland would also be central in any conventional warfare fought between the two pow-

ers. Under Soviet rule, Kuklinski recognized future military actions could include seeing Polish troops invading their neighbors. "That was not the army he wanted his country to have," Weiser said. "He felt Poland should be free, and the United States was the only country that could help make this happen. He felt he had a moral obligation to do something."

In 1972, Kuklinski secretly mailed a letter to the American Embassy in Bonn. He described who he was and said he wanted to assist the United States.

"At the time," said Weiser, "he was a general in the Polish military, on the Army's general staff. He was their liaison with Moscow."

To learn more

Benjamin Weiser's book, "A Secret Life: The Polish Officer, His Covert Mission and the Price He Paid to Save His Country," is published by PublicAffairs Books and is available in hardback and paperback editions.

spy recounted in book

"In the army," said Forden, "his mission had been to defend Poland. But he saw his country was completely subjected to the Soviet imperial system, which was what led to his decision to work with us."

When Forden and Kuklinski first met, the CIA man was worried that Kuklinski, a career soldier, might not want to work with a civilian agency. "But we shook hands," Forden said, "and went right to work."

Originally, Kuklinski proposed to lead a conspiracy inside the Polish Army, identifying other military officers who shared his views. "I told him," said Forden, "you are doomed to fail. You will all lose your lives. Work with us instead." That set the stage for nine-and-a-half years of successful teamwork.

"He was the most valuable operative the CIA recruited during the Cold War," Forden said. "His character, his determination, his courage, his vision of a free Poland" all came into play during the time he worked with the CIA.

"The words 'spies' and 'spy-

ing' were vocabulary that was never used in our conversations," Forden said. "This was not some dirty deal to earn money or get revenge. He felt he had a moral obligation to get his country back."

Forden and Weiser described times when Kuklinski's secret life was nearly exposed. They explained how information was transferred, and they discussed how Kuklinski and his family were spirited out of Poland to the United States, just as his activities were to be discovered. Kuklinski and his family settled in the United States under a CIA protection program. For a time after they fled Poland, Kuklinski was deemed a traitor and became a wanted man in his native country.

Kuklinski later received the CIA's Distinguished Intelligence Medal, the agency's highest honor. In the 1990s he returned to a free Poland, where he was recognized as a patriot, not as a traitor.

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