

The M Room: Secret Listeners who Bugged the Nazis in WW2, by Helen Fry, Agent: Steph Ebdon The Marsh Agency Ltd., London, 2012. 288 pp. (Available through Amazon £12.15.)

The story of CSDIC (Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre) (UK) has been told, in part, on ITV's *Britain's Secret Homes* with Sir David Jason revealing how British Intelligence bugged the conversations of senior Nazi POWs for the duration of the war. British Intelligence held 59 German generals at Trent Park near Cockfosters in North London, who paraded – one could fairly say “strutted” - around the house for up to three years, inadvertently giving away some of Hitler's Germany's most closely guarded secrets. It was one of the most valuable sources of intelligence on flying bombs (V1s) German rocketry (V2s), jet-propelled aircraft and submarine warfare. At Latimer House and Wilton Park, both in Buckinghamshire, lower-rank prisoners and officers were held in cells beneath the house. The secret listeners also tuned into the bugged cells from the ‘M Room’ at these sites. This project, originally part of MI9 became independent as MI19.¹

These three stately homes, deep in the heart of the English countryside, were equipped with the latest and most advanced listening equipment. The “listeners”, working in the specially equipped M Room were connected by the latest and most sophisticated recording equipment to bugging devices in the prisoners cells (in reality comfortable rooms, and for senior generals, even suites) where microphones were hidden: in the light fittings, the fireplaces, behind mirrors, in plants and even in trees in the grounds. At the heart of this clandestine unit were many German-Jewish émigrés who had fled Nazi persecution and were serving in the British army. In an ironic turn of events they had become part of one of British Intelligence's most valuable assets. They were among the secret listeners spending up to twelve hours a day eavesdropping on the conversations of German POW's. They included not only the conversations of U-boat commanders, U-boat crew, infantry soldiers or Luftwaffe pilots but significantly 59 of Hitler's generals and admirals. The results were to prove to be astounding and beyond anything Churchill could have imagined when he authorised unlimited funds for its set-up. It gave British Intelligence unprecedented access to secrets not obtained by any other means until then. The book provides a detailed, sometimes humorous, insight into life of the generals in captivity, some aspects of which are almost unbelievable; for instance, their being taken to dine in top London hotels and restaurants – part of the so-called softening up process – which annoyed Churchill immensely when he came to hear of it. It tells of the various factions that grew up amongst the generals; dependent on their attitude to Hitler and National Socialism. Against this backdrop, the listeners eavesdropped on the admission of war crimes, hearing details of terrible atrocities against Russians, Poles and Jews, as well as of an SS mutiny in a concentration camp in 1936 not recorded anywhere else.

The author is Jewish and this has a significant bearing on the book, placing firmly on record just how much British Intelligence knew about the Holocaust from this source alone. Why, it asks, were these files not released at the end of the war, for the War Crimes Trials? These and other transcripts (many recorded in *Tapping Hitler's Generals*) which revealed some of the most important German military secrets of the war remained classified until 1999.

¹ It was originally created in December 1940 as MI.9a, a sub-section of MI.9. A year later, in December 1941, it became an independent organization, though still closely associated with its parent. MI19 also operated an interrogation centre in Kensington Palace Gardens, London commanded by Lt. Col. Alexander Scotland OBE, known as the “London Cage”, It was a subject of persistent reports of torture by the prisoners confined there, which included war crimes suspects from the SS and Gestapo held in the facility after World War II.

What is amazing is that during their clandestine work the secret listeners, bizarrely, did not set eyes on a single German POW, yet it has been claimed (unproven) that their classified work and the intelligence they gained was as significant for winning the war as Bletchley Park and the cracking the Enigma Cipher machine and, like BP, for over sixty years the listeners never spoke about their work, not even to their families. Many went to their grave bearing the secrets of their work.

Where does one start with this book? Where does it sit comfortably? It describes itself as being about the “secret listeners who bugged the Nazis in WW2”; it is more than that but at the same time, curiously, less. If this was all that you wanted to learn from the book you will be far better off reading *Tapping Hitler’s Generals* edited by Sönke Neitzel, Professor of Modern History at the University of Mainz. Declassified in 1999, the transcripts of the recordings remained in obscurity until he discovered their existence in 2001, stumbling upon 50,000 pages of transcripts in the National Archives. If you are an assiduous researcher you might also come across the contentious historian David Irving’s, work on the Internet on CSDIC dating back to 2007 but which remains unpublished as far as I know.

What *The M Room* does do well is to tell the story of one German Jew, Fritz Lustig, and his experiences following his fleeing Germany. He was one of many Jewish émigrés interned on the Isle of Man in 1940 following the Germans’ over-running of the Low Countries, He served in the British Army, firstly as a member of the Pioneer Corps playing the cello in the Entertainment Section, then as a listener and finally, his transfer to the Intelligence Corps. It ends with his return to civilian life in England as an accountant. He is one of the last two surviving listeners – still playing his cello as he has done throughout his life.²

This is not a heavy book, switching as it does between biography and history, lightened by many amusing anecdotes. It serves as an excellent introduction to a subject previously not known to many and which was an important part of the work of the Corps during WWII. According to the archive records there were at least 133 non-commissioned members of the Corps (many transferred from the Pioneer Corps) known to have served in either CSDIC (UK) and CSDIC (WEA), not all of them émigré Germans, Austrians or Jews. The names of many of those who served are listed in the very helpful appendices. It is a very good and easy “read”: a likeable book, it oddly feels smaller than its 280 pages.

PWC, August 2013.

² There is a fascinating article on Fritz Lustig in *The Oldie*, August 2013.