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Top Tennis Player or Undercover Agent? The Double Life of Fred Kovaleski '49

By Ben Kennedy '05

Khartoum, Sudan: 1957

During his first week as a trainee for a Pepsi bottler in Khartoum, Fred Kovaleski '49 received a message from a man at the American Embassy. Kovaleski called him back.

"Fred, you cannot hide." The voice on the other end of the line was Osborne Day, the CIA's chief of station in Sudan. He and Fred had met before, and Day knew he had the right guy.

Day asked him to come to his house, where the situation was laid out. The Sudanese had helped the agency tap the phones at the Soviet embassy in Khartoum — but there was no one at the CIA who could translate the tapes from Russian into English. The Sudanese wouldn't release the tapes until the CIA had a translator, and Fred had learned Russian during World War II.

"You're just like pennies from heaven, man," said Day. "You can do this. Now I can go to them and say, 'I'll take the tapes and we'll translate them; I've got a speaker!'"

"Hey, wait a minute," said Kovaleski. "I'm just starting this new job and I can use some extra money, but I'm married to a girl who speaks six different languages, including Russian."

"That's incredible!" said Day. "Can we use her?"

"Well," said Kovaleski, "If you can have her cleared. She's the reason I had to resign from the agency."

Hamtramck, Michigan: 1935

Fred Kovaleski spoke Polish at home with his parents at their home in Hamtramck, a small, mostly Eastern European community a few miles from downtown Detroit.

"If you didn't speak Polish in that town, you were a dead duck," says Kovaleski.

In grade school, he was a handball champion, since there wasn't space to play much else in their school. By the time he was 11, his gym teacher, Jean Hoxie, began to see his potential as a tennis player. With no tennis court in Hamtramck, she drew a line on the gym wall at the height of the net and supplied a basket of beat-up tennis balls. She asked if his parents would buy him a racket.

"[My father] didn't understand what the game was about," Kovaleski says. "Finally I told him it was 10 dollars to get me a racket and he just about fell over. He said, 'Look, go play baseball or something.'"

Hoxie, who became a tennis legend in Michigan and a longtime mentor to Kovaleski, bought him the racket and taught him how to play. By his senior year in high school, Kovaleski had been selected to the U.S. Junior Davis Cup team and was a hot recruiting commodity, receiving attention from the University of Michigan, Michigan State and Notre Dame.

"Hoxie says to me, 'Fred, I want to get you out of this town. You've got to leave this environment,'" remembers Kovaleski. She called her friend Sharvey Umbeck, tennis coach at William and Mary, and arranged for Fred to come to the College.

Williamsburg, Virginia: 1946

His first stay at college did not last long. Kovaleski turned 18 in October 1942 and, partially due to a lackluster academic record, left school shortly thereafter to enlist in the air cadets. He won a presidential citation as a paratrooper with the 11th Airborne during the invasion of the Philippines, liberating 2,100 internees from a Japanese prison camp outside Manila. In February 1946, he was discharged and determined to pick up where he left off.

"There was no question I was going back to William and Mary," he says. "I contacted Sharvey Umbeck. I was on the GI Bill anyway, so he welcomed me back."

Kovaleski's second tour in Williamsburg was markedly more successful. The men's tennis team won the NCAA national championships in both 1947 and 1948 — still the only two teams to win national titles in William and Mary history.

"Most of us who had come back after the war had matured substantially," he says. "We knew we wanted to make the grade, get our degrees and then go on with our lives."

Some of the players on the late '40s teams were men Kovaleski had known on the junior circuit before the war, so the team got along well

despite the solitary nature of tennis.

“We had wonderful camaraderie, but you cannot divorce it from being an individual sport,” he says. “When you’re out there, you’re on your own. Nobody can coach you or advise you. You’ve got to make up your own strategy and your own tactics while you’re there.”

The success of the team and of Kovaleski individually earned him an invitation from the United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA, today just the USTA) to play in their tournaments. Before long he was invited to play on the overseas circuit for a few weeks. With some financial help from Jean Hoxie, Fred Kovaleski was off to Europe.

Monte Carlo, Monaco: April 1951

Government degree in hand, Kovaleski played all over the world: France, Italy, Pakistan, India, Hong Kong, the Philippines, even Wimbledon where he was seeded 13th. Each engagement seemed to end with an invitation to yet another tournament, and Fred was happy to continue his globetrotting.

The custom for visiting American players was to visit the local U.S. embassy, where they would meet with top-ranking American officials. In Cairo, Kovaleski met Counselor of Embassy Joseph Sparks, who took a liking to him.

“Fred, whenever you decide you’re going to stop touring around, write me,” said Sparks. “I’ll send letters of introduction to a number of people I know in the State Department. You look to me like you’d be a good candidate.”

Kovaleski’s tennis tour continued on to Monte Carlo, Monaco, where a USLTA official was waiting for him. His few weeks touring Europe had turned into a year playing tennis across Europe, Asia and Africa — much longer than the USLTA had intended, and without their permission. Allegations surfaced that he had accepted money for his expenses while playing in Calcutta.

“[The official] said, ‘Either you come home right after Monte Carlo or we’ll declare you a professional,’ and I didn’t want that to happen,” he says. This would have been a disaster: only the smallest handful of players could make a living in professional tennis in the ’50s.

“So I said, OK, I give up. I’ll play Monte Carlo and I’m coming home.”

Washington, D.C.: Late 1951

Newly unemployed, Kovaleski remembered Joseph Sparks’ advice in Cairo and wrote him looking for work. Shortly afterwards, he received copies of letters Sparks wrote to “every undersecretary of state for every region in the world.” After a few meetings at the State Department, Kovaleski got a call about a “more extensive interview” to be held at a private home. He was being groomed to become a spy.

He passed the CIA’s polygraph test, signed the papers and began his training in unofficial offices and apartments throughout Washington and in the woods at Camp Peary near Williamsburg.

His first assignment with the agency was training Soviet Army defectors, a story detailed in the Jan. 15, 2006 *Washington Post Magazine* by Fred’s son Serge Kovaleski ’84, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. Serge remembers the stories his father told about handling defectors in the CIA’s safehouses in suburban Maryland. Some relationships Fred built in those days lasted throughout his life, under cover and outside it.

By 1954, however, Fred had to leave that behind. It was time to return to one of the stops on his tennis itinerary — with a very different purpose.

Cairo, Egypt: September 1954

As an agent in “deep cover,” Kovaleski returned to his role as an international tennis player in Egypt’s capital, where he had last played in 1951.

“My superiors made that decision,” he says. “They asked if I could live as a tennis player and I said that was the easiest thing I could do.”

Kovaleski’s ability to speak Russian served the CIA well: his work helping to tap the Soviet embassy’s phones resulted in 18 months’ worth of tapes. When a Soviet defector appeared in the port of Alexandria, Egypt, the CIA field office in Germany relied on Kovaleski’s instincts and organized an operation to bring him in.

A four-man paramilitary team met Kovaleski in Alexandria and explained the plan: after midnight, a three-car convoy would take the defector to Cairo, where he would get on a plane to Germany for debriefing. The road from Alexandria to Cairo was straight and would be practically empty, apart from the two checkpoints along the way.

“Okay, Fred,” the team leader said. “You’re in the car in the middle of the convoy, I will be in the front and we will have one car in the back. You’re armed, we are armed, and we are not giving this guy up to the Egyptians.”

They passed the first checkpoint without incident: the guards there were half-asleep. Second checkpoint: same thing. The convoy barreled right into the embassy compound, where the defector got inside a wooden crate full of old furniture. They put the crate on an embassy truck — for diplomatic immunity — and took it to the airstrip.

“You never met a more dedicated or more committed group of young men in your life. I mean, all of us, we were ready to jump out of planes, live in tunnels, do whatever the agency wanted,” says Kovaleski.

While Kovaleski’s cover story eventually changed from tennis pro to travel agent, he continued his work in Cairo with the CIA. There he fell in love with a woman named Manya Jabes of Russian descent. Marriage, however, required approval by his boss at the agency.

“I supplied her name, birthdate, family members, et cetera, all of which was cabled back to D.C. for security processing,” says Kovaleski. “They discovered that Manya’s father had divorced Manya’s mother, married another Russian woman who was a poet and returned to the Soviet Union.”

She was considered a security risk. The CIA told Kovaleski he had to choose his career or Manya. He chose Manya and resigned as an officer of the CIA.

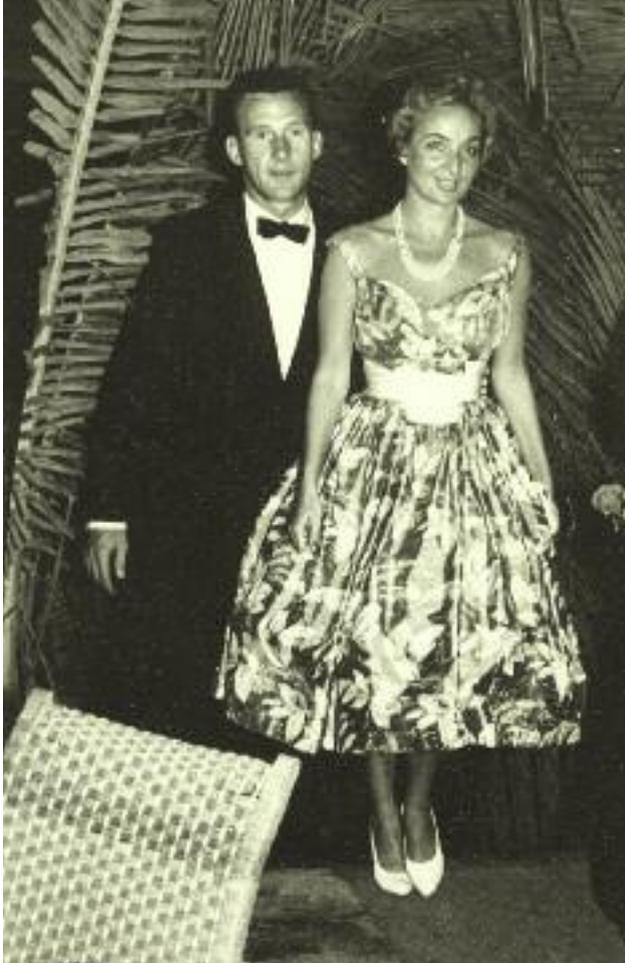
Cape Town, South Africa: April 1961

Manya and Fred were married in Beirut, Lebanon, where Fred had taken his first post-CIA job: with Pepsi as a field representative trainee. (His resume, of course, was that of a former tennis player and travel agent, not a CIA spy.) He moved to Khartoum, Sudan, to learn the business before Manya could join him.

It was shortly after his arrival that Osborne Day, the CIA’s head officer in Sudan, called him about translating the Soviet tapes. Day and Kovaleski had both trained at Camp Peary together. Plus, although the CIA considered Manya a security risk, the agency thought highly enough of Fred that they kept him on a contract basis for work like this. Fred nevertheless suggested Manya for the translation job.

The agency ran Manya through a second security check and she passed: considered so dangerous she couldn’t marry a CIA agent, but not dangerous enough she couldn’t work for the CIA herself. Fred still laughs when he thinks of the irony.

As he moved from place to place, ascending the Pepsi ranks, Fred



Left: Fred and Manya Kovalski at a Christmas party in Aden, Yemen, in 1958. **Above:** (l-r) Fred, Manya and Serge Kovalski with Serge's wife, Jo Becker, at Fred's induction into the Eastern Tennis Hall of Fame in 2007. **Below:** Fred Kovalski as a William and Mary tennis player in 1949.

continued his agency contract work scouting unions in Aden (in what is now Yemen) and making drops in Cape Town before deciding that it was too much. Serge was born in 1961, and with a family to take care of plus an increasingly successful career, it was time for Fred Kovalski to convert entirely to civilian life. Pepsi never knew.

Sydney, Australia: 1964

Some years later, Pepsi needed a manager in Adelaide, Australia. They were offering to loan millions of dollars to a bottler there in exchange for supervision of their four plants in South Australia. Kovalski was their man, eventually working his way up to lead Pepsi's Australia-based operations. After earning an M.B.A. at Columbia University, he moved into cosmetics and joined Revlon's international division in Australia, where they were the No. 1 cosmetics company. Fred served on Australia's national council for cosmetics and over-the-counter drugs while in Sydney.

In 1971, the family moved back to New York, where Fred became Revlon's vice president for Europe and the Middle East. Serge, their only son, grew up in New York City. On a father-son trip to Williamsburg, Serge was taken with the College and ended up following in his father's footsteps.

"I hope every guy is somehow lucky enough to live as happily a family life as we have," says Fred.

The Kovalskis have indeed made their family a priority. When Serge returned to Washington after four and a half years as a foreign correspondent for the *Post* in Central and South America, Fred and Manya moved to D.C. to be near him. Serge's 2006 *Post* story about his

father's spy days met with great acclaim, but it also strengthened the bond between father and son.

"The real highlight for me was just the joy of sitting down with my dad every day for five weeks or so and having him share his awe-inspiring life with me," Serge says. "Yes, it was journalism, but I also felt like I was being given a precious gift."

And when Serge was offered what he calls his "ultimate dream job" with the *New York Times* in 2006 — where he would go on to win the 2009 Pulitzer Prize in Breaking News as part of the reporting team investigating former New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer — his parents moved back to Manhattan as well.

New York City: October 2009

"It's probably made my wife and me tighter because of all the experiences we've had," says Fred. "Some of them were tinged with a little bit of risk and a little bit of danger."

Fred and Manya, married 52 years, live in midtown Manhattan now, after decades spent crisscrossing the globe. Serge and his wife, Jo Becker (a Pulitzer-winning journalist herself), are only a few minutes away. And even after all these years, Fred still finds time to hit the tennis courts. In September 2009, he went to Massachusetts and won the USTA National Men's Grass Court Championships for 85 and over. He's No. 1 in the world for his age group.

"I can play even with these guys who are around 60," he says. "They run a little faster — in fact, some much faster — but I can move the ball around better."

In the coming years, the USTA will try to stay prepared for Fred, who himself seems hardly able to stop moving. They've already created a separate age category for 90-plus. ■