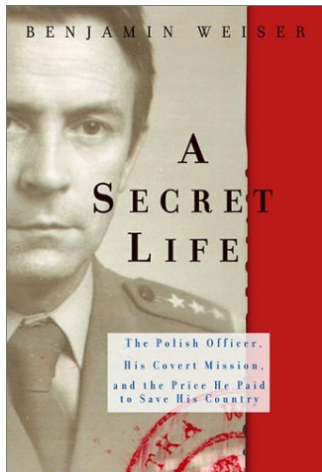

***A Secret Life: The Polish Officer, His Covert Mission, and the Price He Paid to Save His Country* by Benjamin Weiser, PublicAffairs, January 2004, 383 pages.**



A Secret Life, a book by Benjamin Weiser, is a painfully detailed account of the cooperation between the CIA and Colonel Ryszard Kukliński, a high ranking officer in the General Staff of the Polish Army. In 1972, Colonel Kukliński offered to provide the CIA with any information that could be used by the American government to weaken the Soviet empire. For Kukliński, his cooperation with the Americans was the culmination of a feeling, built up over a 20 year period, of disappointment with the Communist system. Kukliński was also deeply troubled by the imperialistic attitudes of the Soviet Union towards its Eastern European satellites. “As [a] patriotic Pole with no love for the Soviets, he felt he should contribute to the West. (p.19).” He knew he was not alone in this endeavor. At the close of one of the first meetings with his CIA handlers he “grew emotional [...] [and] added: [...] I would like to extend, above all on my own behalf, to the defense leadership of the United States, my assurances that just as I think, think almost 30 million Poles. It is our deep yearning to find ourselves with you in the free world [...] (p.27).” His feelings for America were not new either. He recalled how in the 1940s, in a monastery school when “[...] he lost himself in a Polish

translation of ***Uncle Tom’s Cabin***, he felt a priest grab his ear and admonish him. [...] As he later recalled, God seemed to be saying, *Be careful Ryszard. Be careful with America.* (p. 32).”

A blurb on the back of the jacket compares the book to “a James Bond mystery.” But James Bond is a fantasy - this is almost a reality. And, it is a reality made from mostly boring sequences of quick and sometimes clumsy exchanges of secreted materials, sandwiched around fears of being found out. It is a tale of missed secret chalk marks, faulty communication equipment, and forgotten drop spots. Every delivery of material to the CIA by Kukliński is accompanied by Kukliński’s exhortations to freedom and greatness of the West. This becomes tiresome after a while. Being an educated officer he must have known, for example, about the British guarantees to Poland prior to WWII, or the Yalta conference, yet his infatuation with the West is steadfastly unreflective. Descriptions of the 1970s Poland are also quite unfamiliar. By these accounts one would be hard pressed to find a communist Pole. On weekends, provincial Catholic churches overflow with communist officials either christening their babies or marrying their children. Some characters are almost comical - every Pole seems to either help CIA personnel to avoid surveillance or stows guns in addition to spy paraphernalia (p.157).

The book is most interesting when it shows how the CIA does and does not work. When it works it is at its best - as when the Agency cleverly reinforces what seems to motivate Kukliński. When Kukliński’s handler, with whom the Colonel exchanges intimate correspondence, is re-assigned to a different posting, the Agency creates a surrogate - a team of agents including a translator - who respond to Kukliński’s letters as alter ego of his original handler, signing their correspondence with the handler’s name. Or, when it provides its spies with placebo suicide pills: “[...] That’s where I often said, ‘Give it to him but make sure it doesn’t work,’ [...] ‘He will go on working for us, confident that all he’s got to do is bite this thing and he’ll die. Meanwhile, I’ll get my production. (p.68).” Or, when we learn how the agents organize the exchange routes, drop points, how they avoid surveillance, and so on. Sometimes the Agency does not work. An agent sent to meet Kukliński on the day of his exfiltration does not speak fluent Polish and is unable to explain to the Colonel the details of his escape. Kukliński cannot read a typed message, brought to the meeting, since he forgot his reading glasses (p.271-5). If it weren’t for a street light and large print on an index card, this book would have a different ending.

Kukliński had cooperated with the CIA for 9 years during which time he provided the Agency with 40,265 pages of classified documents (that’s 12 pages per day including weekends). The Agency could barely handle the inflow of material - in July 1978, an internal CIA memo stated that there was “[...] a considerable quantity of documentary material yet to be processed. (p.158).” The backlog must have persisted for years as only in 1981, after Kukliński’s exfiltration from Poland, were the CIA analysts able “[...] to clear up ambiguities and questions they had long had. (p. 295).” After escaping from Poland in 1981, Kukliński was tried in absentia in a Polish military court, stripped of his citizenship, and sentenced to death. The sentence was overturned in 1998 on the eve of Poland’s joining NATO. The ruling was reversed after Polish authorities were forcefully pressured on this issue by influential American political figures - Zbigniew Brzezinski, former ambassador to Poland Davis, and others. Kukliński, who died in February of this year in the United States, remains a controversial figure in Poland. The Poles remain divided between those who consider him a traitor and those who consider him a hero. The book does not take a position on whether Kukliński should be viewed as one or the other. This you have to decide by yourself.

Mariusz Sumliński