



A SECRET SACRIFICE

No one knew what to expect from a mysterious Polish man who contacted U.S. officials in Germany.

BY WILLIAM HOLDER '75

Photography by Bill Burkhart

< Daniel Forden '52, a retired CIA officer living in Williamsburg, Va., became close friends with a top CIA source in Poland.

Tuesday, Nov. 3, 1981
CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia

As David Forden '52 displayed his ID badge to the guards at the entrance gate to CIA headquarters, he was preoccupied by the growing unrest in Poland.

Over breakfast he had seen the day's *Washington Post* story reporting that union organizer Lech Walesa, Solidarity's leader, was urging a quarter of a million striking workers in Poland to return to work. The rise of Solidarity had plunged Poland into turmoil and threatened to weaken Moscow's iron grip on its satellite state.

Forden, head of the CIA's Soviet/East Europe Division, was responsible for ensuring that the U.S. government had reliable information about the unfolding crisis. Sources quoted by the *Post* had speculated that imposition of martial law was a remote possibility, but a top Solidarity official had dismissed these rumors.

Forden knew better. The CIA possessed unusually detailed information about Polish government intentions thanks to a source highly placed in the Polish military. This individual had access to the most sensitive secrets of the Warsaw Pact, and he had just informed the CIA that the government was preparing to crack down on Solidarity by imposing martial law. The plan was ready.

Even worse, if Polish officials could not bring the troublesome trade union to heel, the Soviets were poised to launch a full-scale invasion of the sort not seen since 1968 in Czechoslovakia.

Forden had no higher priority than the safety of this Polish source. The intelligence he conveyed was so valuable that, after careful scrubbing, it frequently provided briefing material for the president and other top national security officials. Most CIA case officers only dreamed of working with such a highly placed and productive source. His information set "the gold standard" (in the words of one CIA official). Forden's relationship to this person, however, went beyond that of case officer to source, beyond mere friendship. They were brother soldiers engaged in a very dangerous Cold War mission.

Forden had just run up four flights of stairs and walked into his office at 7:45 a.m. when his deputy chief of operations, Steve Weber, approached his desk, holding out a cable. Forden approached him apprehensively and read it. His informant, his friend, the man who for more than nine years had provided the CIA with a torrent of highly classified military secrets, needed to get out of Poland in a hurry. There had been a leak.

This story of one of the CIA’s most significant operations would have remained hidden in the agency’s locked vaults were it not for *New York Times* reporter Benjamin Weiser, author of *A Secret Life: The Polish Officer, His Covert Mission, and the Price He Paid to Save His Country* (2004). Reading about the case in a book by Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*, who had made a brief reference to an important Polish source, Weiser wrote to the agency seeking permission to interview this shadowy individual. Thus began a project extending over many years. Weiser met with this man, one of the CIA’s most important Cold War assets, in hotel rooms and CIA-selected houses in the Washington area. He negotiated an agreement with the CIA that enabled him to use vast amounts of original case material after the agency vetted it for release to him. The result is an extraordinarily detailed account of an operation that chillingly evokes the Cold War era and raises questions about the meaning of loyalty.

The operation began on a tentative note. In August of 1972, Weiser relates, a German employee of the U.S. Embassy in Bonn opened a letter addressed in blue felt-tip pen to the military attaché in the “U.S.A. Embassy [sic] Bonn, Express.” In broken English the writer asked to meet in Amsterdam or Ostend with a U.S. Army officer of the rank of Lt. Colonel or Colonel. The CIA chief of station in Bonn cabled Langley, suggesting that the author might be a seaman. Officials at headquarters were skeptical, but recommended that a meeting be arranged on the off chance that something might materialize.

Two CIA officers met the letter writer in The Hague at the central railway station on August 17. Identifying themselves as U.S. army officers, they adjourned to the nearby Central Hotel. In Polish, their contact introduced himself as Ryszard Kuklinski, a lieutenant colonel on the Polish general staff. A skilled sailor, he had organized a yacht trip with fellow officers. They were posing as tourists, but their mission was to spy on Western ports they knew only from maps. Kuklinski’s ulterior motive was to meet with the U.S. military. He had a proposal.

The agents asked Kuklinski about the material to which he had access. He replied that he possessed detailed knowledge of Soviet war plans for Western Europe and had himself written the latest exercises for Warsaw Pact and Soviet troops. He believed that NATO suffered from significant gaps in its under-

standing of Soviet intent and capabilities, and he wanted to fill them in, believing that would help keep the peace. From the outset, Kuklinski insisted that his motivation was purely patriotic: underneath his professional public persona he harbored a deep anger at the Soviet subjugation of Poland.

Kuklinski knew other officers similarly inclined, and he proposed to form a conspiracy to provide an early warning to the West in the event that the Soviets should decide to launch an unprovoked attack. His CIA contacts immediately dissuaded him. They were certain the Polish secret police, the SB, would rout out the conspirators in no time. But a single source in the general staff might go undetected if he were careful—and genuine.

In that short meeting Kuklinski revealed high intelligence and an earnest demeanor. The operatives described the five-foot-nine-inch, slender colonel as courageous, well aware of the risk he was inviting. In a subsequent, longer meeting, Kuklinski displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of military affairs and an ability to speak authoritatively and at length about Warsaw Pact war plans. When he returned to Poland and started supplying Warsaw Station with documents, any doubts about his credibility evaporated. No foreign power would willingly part with the kind of information that he was handing over. Henceforth, Kuklinski’s code name would be “Gull,” chosen because of his fondness for the sea.

The agency decided that it needed an officer who spoke Polish for what officials hoped would be annual face-to-face meetings during summer voyages similar to the one Kuklinski had just arranged. They selected Forden, then stationed in Mexico City. In the mid-’60s he had served a two-year tour as chief of station in Warsaw. He began working with a tutor to brush up on his Polish language skills.

Born in Buffalo, David Forden developed a desire to pursue government service that grew out of his family’s reliance on WPA jobs during the Great Depression. Forden realized that without the help of the government, his family would have been devastated by poverty.

At Wesleyan on scholarship, he studied with such luminaries in the government department as E.E. Schattschneider and Stephen Bailey. After graduation, he won a fellowship to the Maxwell School of

Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, where he obtained a master’s in public administration in a 10-month program.

Every spring, Forden relates, a contingent of Maxwell graduates would go to Washington, D.C., to take advantage of the strong alumni network, which routinely helped new graduates find jobs. In January of 1953, however, President Eisenhower decided to reduce the size of the federal government. The acronym RIF, “reduction in force,” came into the language.

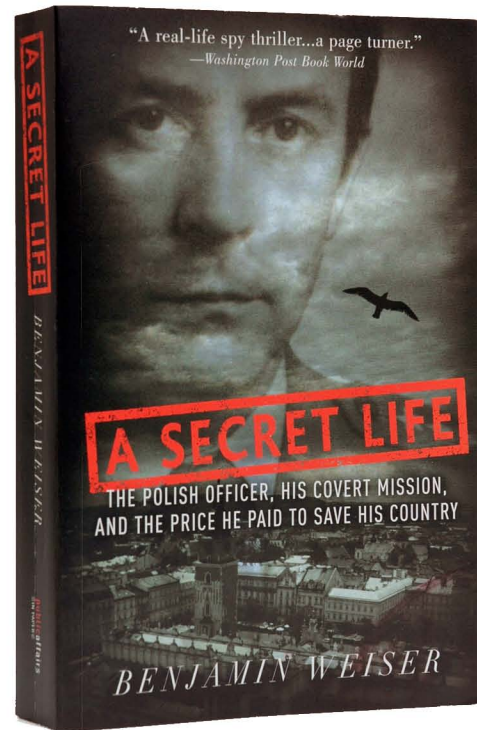
“When we arrived to press the buttons on our network,” Forden says, “we were told, ‘sorry guys, there are no jobs’.”

One exception was the CIA. Forden went to the agency’s headquarters, located then at 2430 E Street N.W., with a group that included his Maxwell roommate Peter Falk (later star of the *Colombo* television series). Forden was invited back the following day and later hired, but Falk was not because he had graduated from the New School in New York, which the agency considered “a little pink.”

At this time, “a little pink” was a serious charge. Senator Joe McCarthy had inflamed anti-communist passions during the infamous Red Scare of the early 1950s. The Soviets had acquired the atomic bomb just a few years earlier; the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on charges of selling atomic secrets rocked and riveted the nation. Graduates of Ivy League universities were streaming to Washington to fight communism. But Forden was not driven by ideology so much as by the need for a job.

As part of his cover, Forden joined the army. Following basic training, he went to Fort Benning officer candidate school, participating in a mentally and physically taxing six-month course that had a two-thirds attrition rate. Forden was determined not to fail, partly because he had no attractive alternatives for employment. Years later his success acquired a tinge of irony. While a junior at Wesleyan he had visited a CIA recruiter on campus who noted in a file that Forden “didn’t have the stamina for a career in clandestine services.”

In 1965, after holding a series of positions in Germany and Latin America, Forden seized on the opportunity to become chief of station in Warsaw. Operating in a “denied” area was a plum assignment, if tricky. Exposure as a CIA officer would result in being “PNG’d,” i.e., labeled as persona non grata and expelled from the country. For citizens in denied area



countries who cooperated with the CIA, exposure meant death. When Forden went to Warsaw, the agency was still coming to terms with a major failure that resulted in the execution of Oleg Penkovsky, a colonel in Soviet military intelligence. Penkovsky had supplied the United States with highly classified documents of great importance during the Cuban missile crisis, but poor tradecraft on the CIA’s part led to his arrest. The agency needed to find ways of exchanging information with sources that, if not foolproof, would be very difficult for enemy surveillance to detect.

Field officers devised the “brush pass,” which relied on exploiting a brief gap in surveillance—so brief that a hostile agent conducting surveillance would not be alarmed. By carefully selecting a rendezvous point that required a quick right turn, a CIA agent could take an otherwise unremarkable stroll, yet exchange materials with a source before the trailing hostile agent had time to round the corner. It was essential that the exchange be precisely timed and fast so that the source could disappear into the surroundings immediately. The technique became known as operating “in the gap.” Forden saw how it might be adapted to the Warsaw streetscape, an insight that was to prove invaluable.

In 1973, on an evening in June, ten months after Kuklinski’s initial contact, Forden met the Polish colonel for the first time in a small, spartanly furnished apartment used as a CIA safe house in Hamburg, Germany. The two were nearly the same age, and each had chosen a career with public service in mind. Determined to be honest from the outset, Forden dispensed with the fiction that Kuklinski was meeting with army officers. In Polish he introduced himself by his code name, Daniel, and said, “I’m from the CIA and I’m delighted to be here and working with you.”

Only the CIA, he explained to Kuklinski, had the resources to work clandestinely with him. The colonel was untroubled by the revelation. He stressed that he did not consider himself to be a traitor, but was “stabbing back” at the oppressive Soviets for the harm they had done to Poland.

Forden ran the operation from Langley. He saw Kuklinski only during short sessions afforded by the colonel’s yacht trips in summer. These meetings required careful cover stories for Kuklinski’s absences from his colleagues; one ruse was shopping for automobile parts that were readily obtainable only in the West. That left long periods every year when Kuklinski

worked under unrelenting tension in Warsaw with no contact beyond brief exchanges of documents and film. He wrote to Forden that every time he went to one of the risky exchanges, he “bid his family a discreet farewell,” not knowing if he would ever see them again.

“I wanted to be sure,” Forden says, “that Kuklinski knew we saw him as a courageous human being.” A colleague suggested that Forden write letters that would be included in clandestine exchanges. Forden drafted a letter that one colleague criticized as “soupy.” But knowing that Kuklinski had no one else in whom he could confide, Forden was reaching beyond the business relationship, speaking from the heart and inviting the colonel to reciprocate. “That set our personal relationship,” he says.

In one letter Forden wrote: “The importance of your security, of your well-being and that of your family, is unmatched by any other consideration. Sure, we will labor over every package from you, to examine and benefit from the documents you have selected and copied so expertly. They will have, as they already have had, tremendous value to my government. But, always, our first concern in opening each package is to find the personal note from you, to learn that you are...OK!”

Kuklinski responded to “Daniel”: “Your personal letters and the entire pertinent correspondence are for me a special kind of reward for the tensions and anxieties which, after all, I included in my thoroughly thought out and absolutely mature decision to initiate our cooperation....Daniel, although the recent period of time did not spare me shocks and psychological tensions, the state of my health is good and the feeling of security stronger than ever before.”

To exchange information, Warsaw Station was using the technique that Forden had suggested a few years earlier when he was chief of station. It was a variant of the brush pass, carried out by an officer in a car making a quick right turn at carefully selected locations around Warsaw. The technique required the officer to abandon the rendezvous if Polish secret police were in close pursuit or even if “casuals” (unidentified bystanders) were spotted near the proposed site of exchange. CIA case officers would spend hours driving in and around Warsaw prior to a car pass in an attempt to ensure that they were clear of surveillance. For his part, Kuklinski had to melt into the shadows immediately after an exchange.

One exchange nearly ended in disaster, which accounted for some of the “psychological tension”

Kuklinski reported. After taking a package from CIA officers, but before he could step backward from their car, a cream-colored Fiat 125 caught him in its lights. Two men were leaning forward trying to identify him. He ran but the car pursued him. He shook his pursuers by dodging down alleys and through buildings. Eventually, he wound up at the central railway station, boarded a train for a suburban location, and then took a bus back into Warsaw. He called his teenage son at home. With slurred speech he said he had left a vodka party too drunk to drive home; could he have a ride? At midnight he returned home, terrified that he might have been identified. His luck had held, however, and no suspicion settled on him.

After this narrow escape, the agency asked Kuklinski to suspend activity for several months just in case he was being watched. The colonel complied to the extent that he broke off contact with Warsaw Station, but he continued to copy material that he later told Forden was “much too attractive to be ignored.”

Some of the documents he obtained were crucial to the security of the West. Kuklinski said he hoped that one Soviet document on ground forces “might once and for all dissolve your doubts concerning Soviet intentions...to deceive and swindle the West regarding the numerical strength of forces under negotiation [in Vienna arms talks].”

On another sensitive document, the CIA said that this was “potentially the single most important document that you have provided us in our long and productive association, because it will not only impact on all branches of the U.S. military establishment but will also impact on NATO force structure in the forward area.”

By November of 1981, Kuklinski had been working with the CIA for more than nine years through 60 exchanges and despite more than one close call (see sidebar). He had supplied the CIA with more than 40,000 pages of documentary intelligence, nearly all laboriously photographed at his home or office. Forden had been absent from the operation for three years while he served as chief of station in Vienna, but he had returned to Langley as chief of the Soviet/East Europe Division.

On Monday, Nov. 2, 1981, at about 1 p.m., Kuklinski arrived at a meeting to find his superiors, as Weiser describes, looking pale and grim. Moscow had alerted them to a disastrous, treasonous leak. The CIA had obtained the latest Polish government plans for imposing martial law to quell the Solidarity-led uprising. Only a handful of top officers had access to these

plans. An investigation would be launched; Kuklinski knew he had, at best, days before he would be subjected to intense scrutiny. He had drafted most of the plan and it was in his safe.

He went home and for the first time told his wife, Hanka, and their two sons that he was working with the Americans in an operation against the Soviet Union and was about to be exposed. They had to flee the country.

Using the Iskra, a newly developed device for electronic communication with Warsaw Station, Kuklinski reported that he had been compromised. Warsaw Station sent a “Flash” cable, the highest priority, to Langley. When Forden arrived at work on Nov. 3, that was the cable Steve Weber handed to him.

“Steve told me that we had a real problem with the Gull operation,” Forden relates. “As soon as I read the cable, my first realization was that we had told Kuklinski through all these years that his security is most important to us and that we would protect him in every way we could. We failed. My second thought, immediately, was that it was not a failure of Warsaw Station, tradecraft, or communications.”

Kuklinski said that the Soviets had cited clandestine “Rome sources” as having learned that “Plan Spring”—the martial law plan—was in the hands of Langley. The cryptic reference to Rome baffled Forden.

He responded with his own Flash cable to trigger the plan that Warsaw Station had for exfiltrating Kuklinski and his family. Then, on three successive nights, station case officers attempted to pick up the colonel and his family. Each time, close surveillance by the SB forced them to abort their plans. With growing desperation, the Americans tried another option. Tom Ryan, chief of Warsaw Station, and his wife had gone to Berlin just before the crisis began. Forden instructed them to remain there on the chance that having them out of Poland would turn out to be useful. Now he asked them to time their drive from Berlin to Warsaw so that they could pick up the family. Since the SB did not normally initiate surveillance at the border, they might be able to make the run undetected.

The plan worked. After driving 12 hours back to Warsaw by a circuitous route, the Ryans picked up the Kuklinski family and covered them with blankets and raincoats. At the U.S. Embassy, the Kuklinski’s were placed in an embassy van with diplomatic plates, hidden in boxes, and smuggled out of Poland. At 9:55 a.m., after a long, terrifying night, the family arrived at an American military base in West Berlin.



Shortly before he was forced to flee to the United States, Col. Kuklinski had this photograph taken for military identification.

A spy novel might end here, but in real life there was more than one postscript to Kuklinski’s story. The CIA settled him into the Washington, D.C., area under an assumed name. Director William Casey presented him with the Distinguished Intelligence Medal, the CIA’s highest honor.

In Poland, a military court sentenced him in absentia to death for treason. Kuklinski never shrank from a firm belief in the rightness of what he had done, but the savaging of his reputation in his home country was hard for him to bear. Forden recounts one evening when he had to spend hours persuading the colonel not to return to Poland, where he wanted to face a public trial solely for the opportunity to tell his side of the story.

Even after the fall of communism, Kuklinski remained an outcast. Polish President Lech Walesa did not lift the death sentence because he was intimidated by the army, Forden says. Not until Poland sought entry into NATO did U.S. officials acquire the bargaining chip they needed, and Kuklinski was exonerated. He never lived in Poland again, but he did return to his home country, where he delivered a national radio broadcast and received a warm welcome that was not, however, universally extended.

Though he lived to see his name cleared, he paid a tragically high price. Retired military officials in Poland continued to vilify him at every opportunity. In the roiling political atmosphere of the early post-communist years, Kuklinski was attacked from both left and right. Both his sons died in the United States, one in a boating accident.

Kuklinski died suddenly on Feb. 11, 2004, but not before he had an opportunity to read Weiser’s book and early reviews. In February 2005, Weiser and Forden went to Poland at the publisher’s behest to help launch the Polish edition of the book. Forden had not been to Warsaw since the grim grey days of communism. A transformed city greeted him: Marriotts and Sheratons, boutiques, metro lines, and a vibrant people who walk differently without the weight of Soviet oppression. Interest in the book was high.

For one Q&A session before an audience of about 100 Poles, Forden dusted off his Polish and presented a two-minute introduction. Weiser says the Poles were surprised and responded with enormous applause.

“David has a real love of Poland and a real appreciation for Poles,” Weiser says. “We both missed being able to do this with Kuklinski. David was able to portray the man he knew in a way that people appreciated.”

Poles remain fascinated and passionate about Kuklinski; the book has hovered near the top of the Polish bestseller list.

“I think the book is going to have a considerable positive impact on the large middle ground of opinion that was under-informed or misinformed before it came out,” Forden says. “The Polish people had been told a lot of lies about Col. Kuklinski.”

The story poses difficult questions that go straight to the heart of the Polish national psyche. Shortly after Weiser first published articles on Kuklinski, when he was working for the *Washington Post*, former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski spoke about Poles’ confusion over national identity during the Soviet era: “Was it an authentic Polish state or an imposed satellite? Was opposition to it therefore legitimate or illegitimate? The recently highly publicized case of Colonel Kuklinski I think reveals confusion and hesitation on this issue even by the best people.”

For his part, Kuklinski never criticized the choices that others made or placed his own decision on a higher moral plane.

Ultimately, the CIA was unable to protect its most valuable source in the Soviet Bloc from exposure. That failure angered Forden. To this day the Soviets have not said how they learned from “Rome sources” that Langley obtained the secret plans for martial law, though Forden believes the leak stemmed from briefings of Pope John Paul II at the Vatican by Casey and other high-level U.S. officials.

Yet the collaboration between the agency and Kuklinski had been extraordinary by any measure. The story told by Weiser reveals personal heroism and the frightening danger of the Cold War. At a time when the intelligence failures of 9/11 and Iraq dominate the news, the story also shows the CIA’s clandestine work at its best. Weiser writes:

“The operation reveals a side of the CIA that is not often seen—of case officers who joined the agency because they were attracted by the excitement and intrigue of undercover work and by the idea of public service. The CIA is the face America first offers people who, like Kuklinski, are inspired by Western ideals.”

Forden and his colleagues never lost sight of the imperative to ensure that the face America presented to Kuklinski was not only professional, but also warm and caring, dedicated above all else to his safety and that of his family. 🇵🇱

**Do you have an opinion about this topic?
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A Close Call

At eight o’clock one rainy morning in early May, Kuklinski arrived at work and was called to see General Florian Siwicki, chief of the General Staff. Siwicki said that he was about to brief high level officials in the Polish leadership on “Project Albatross,” one of the Warsaw Pact’s most sensitive undertakings [related to Soviet plans for invading Europe]. Albatross involved the construction of three underground bunkers that would exclusively hold Soviet officers for command and control of Warsaw Pact troops in wartime....

Kuklinski had been aware of the project, but the technical details were new to him. He called in the officer who had been working on the assignment. The officer...said that he would have to remain in the office while Kuklinski worked. Kuklinski, certain that the CIA would want the documents, said he would need some privacy. Finally, the officer agreed to stand outside, and Kuklinski closed the door but did not lock it, knowing that would raise suspicions. He placed the document on his desk, planted his elbows, and began using the tiny Tubka [which resembled a cigarette lighter] to snap pictures. He had almost finished when the door suddenly swung open.

Kuklinski looked up, and in the instant he made eye contact with the officer, he curled his right hand into a fist to conceal the camera. He then put his hand into his pocket and exchanged the camera for a lighter. In the same instant, he put his left hand into his other pocket, took out a cigarette, and kept both arms moving naturally as he lit it....

Kuklinski returned to his office and peered out the window. A heavy rain was still falling. He saw the officer hurry across the courtyard and through a door into a gatehouse that was near a counterintelligence office. At that moment, Kuklinski considered taking his life: He had his pistol and his [cyanide] pill. But he tried to suppress his panic. There was also a barbershop behind the gatehouse door. Improbably, it seemed to come down to that: The officer was either reporting Kuklinski or getting a haircut. From the book, *A Secret Life: The Polish Officer, His Covert Mission, and the Price He Paid to Save His Country* by Benjamin Weiser. Copyright 2004. Reprinted by arrangement with PublicAffairs, a member of the Perseus Books Group (publicaffairsbooks.com). All rights reserved.