



SKITTLES ROOM

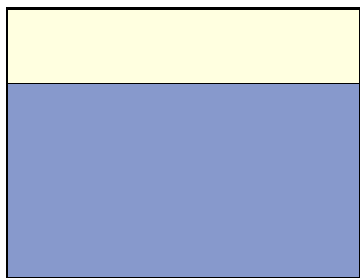
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Was Fischer's Mother a Communist Spy?

by Frank Dudley Berry, Jr.

Some personal notes are required before proceeding with such a provocatively captioned article. I am 55 years old, a deputy district attorney in Santa Clara, largely liberal in my youth, largely conservative now, but never an ideologue. I have no belief in popular conspiracy theories of any kind. Shakespeare wrote the plays; the Californian was the ship that did not come to the aid of the Titanic; Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy, acting on his own, and with no conspiratorial assistance from anyone. If it weren't by chance that I live in the same area in which Fischer's late sister, Joan Fischer Targ, also resided and thus learned some facts that do not jibe with the accepted accounts of Regina Wender Fischer's life; if I hadn't by chance picked up a memoir of an FBI agent detailed to counterintelligence in the 1940's that has nothing to do with chess, but contains one extraordinarily relevant factoid – these notes would never have been written. Finally, what follows is hardly conclusive, although I will state my own speculative beliefs at the end. In terms of proof, it does no more than raise some disturbing questions, although I do have my own opinions. A researcher with more time than I do, willing to make aggressive FOIA requests and investigate the archives of the German Communist Party – if there is any such - can proceed further.

(a) The best collation of the basic facts description of Regina Fischer's background can be found in Frank Brady's book *Profile of a Prodigy*, first published in 1964 and revised after Fischer's victory in the 1972 World Championship match. It is quite short and seems almost deliberately elliptical - much of the basic data is not expressly stated but has to be deduced from the text.

The brief mini-biography indicates that Regina Wender was born in St. Louis in 1914. (Brady does not give the date of birth expressly, but indicates that she was 31 when she divorced in 1945. In a note written for the Sloan-Jacobsen family tree, which I retrieved with a Google search [<http://www.anusha.com/pafg36.htm#2045>], she is described as a Red Diaper baby, the child of radical parents at the turn of the century, and her precise date of birth given as March 31, 1913.) At the age of 19, in 1933, she enrolled in the First Moscow Medical Center and spent five years working towards a medical degree. For reasons Brady does not divulge, she did not complete her work toward her degree. According to Brady, while “on holiday” she met a man named Gerard Fischer in Austria and married him. The marriage lasted for seven years, until

1945, during which Regina and presumably Gerard moved back to the United States. She found a variety of menial jobs - stenographer, typist, welder in Portland, Oregon. She ended up in Los Angeles about the time the war ended (it is implied) and taught school in Phoenix and Mobile. Details are vague; she was in Portland at some unknown time and definitely in Chicago in March of 1943, since Robert Fischer was born there. The brief biography concludes with a notation that Regina was a registered nurse, and moved finally to Brooklyn to get a master's degree in nursing. It was there that Robert Fischer's chess career began.

As sketchy as this is, I am surprised it did not raise more eyebrows at the time. First, to state the obvious, very few U.S. citizens chose Moscow as a place for higher education in 1933 - the United States did not even recognize the Soviet Union until that year. This was not a time of glasnost, perestroika, or even the NEP - these were the high old days of the Comintern and the horrors of the Five Year Plans. Few, if any, persons who were not hard-core committed Communists would have chosen - or been permitted - to be educated in Moscow at that time. She stayed for five years, during a time of famine and monstrous misery in the Soviet Union. It is difficult to believe she was not an extremely dedicated Communist at that time in her life.

But as sketchy as it is, it is also completely and deliberately misleading, as the result of a willful omission of either Brady or Regina Fischer. Joan Fischer Targ died prematurely in 1998, of a cerebral hemorrhage. She was a woman esteemed and respected throughout the Palo Alto community, as well-socialized as her famous brother is not. The obituary published in the local newspaper, easily verified by a Google search, revealed that she was 60 - that is, born in 1938 - and that the city of her birth was Moscow.

In short, even if Brady is truthful about the holiday to Austria in 1938, Regina Wender did not take it as a single girl on a lark. She took it as a young mother with a newborn. (Joan must have been born before the trip, since Regina Wender apparently never returned to the Soviet Union.) More. Unless Robert and Joan are half-siblings - something that no one who has ever written has ever mentioned or intimated - Regina had met Robert's father while she was in Moscow, not later. Brady's account of a vacation meeting, courtship, and marriage is thus a complete invention.

And still more. Although she was still quite young (under 25), Regina did not choose to return home to her family and American medical facilities to give birth. She must have been enormously committed to the man, or the cause, or both, to remain in Moscow after she became pregnant.

Brady is absolutely silent about Gerard Fischer. Although Regina was associated him for at least eight years - from sometime in 1937 to the divorce in 1945, Brady provides no information about his family, background, origins, etc. But surely some data was available; except for a cryptic reference to a short meeting between father and son in Chile, Brady says nothing.

The account of Regina's activities after he supposed marriage is also odd.

Although she has funds enough to journey from Moscow to Austria in 1938, she is suddenly so impoverished that she has to take a series of menial jobs in the United States. Although she has substantial medical training, and an interest in medicine that continued throughout her entire life, she does not seek a position in medicine, but instead these demeaning jobs. The welding job in Portland is particularly puzzling. Although she has one and then two children under 6, she does not return to St. Louis - in her biography and all that of her son, there is not the slightest indication that any of them have any communication whatsoever with any member of the extended family. And when and where did Gerard depart? (He must have accompanied her since Fischerf was obviously conceived in the United States.)

The upshot of all this is that the conventional account of Regina's life contains at least one deliberate deception and raises all sorts of obvious questions that Brady's narrative make no attempt to answer. However, whatever the reasons for Regina Wender's journeys, it was not disenchantment with the politics of the Communist Party. It is also well-known that she remained committed to left wing causes through most of her adult life. She finished her medical degree in 1966 in the Freidrich Schiller University in East Germany, at a time when that Communist Party was considerably more repressive than the Russian version. As will be seen, the family's connection with the Soviet Union persisted until the 1980's.

(b) One isolated factoid from an otherwise unrelated reminiscence of a counterintelligence agent sheds extraordinary light on the identity of Fischer's father. In January of 1988, a retired FBI agent named Robert Lamphere published an account of his career in the 1940's entitled *The FBI-KGB WAR; A Special Agent's Account*. The book recounts his experiences with Fuchs, Herbert Gold, the Rosenbergs, and so forth. It was reprinted in 1996 and his available from Amazon, and Barnes and Noble. It has nothing whatsoever to do with Regina or Bobby Fischer - I doubt that Lamphere has ever heard of either of them. I checked it out of the in the late 80's library for no special reason, other than that the marginal personalities who were involved in Soviet espionage activity have always interested me.

Nonetheless, I sat bolt upright in my chair when Lamphere casually mentioned that German Communist agents were accustomed to check into hotels and drop points with the same coded surname on every occasion, intended to identify them to other members of the organization as field agents. This is the factoid.

The universal surname used throughout the organization was... "Fischer".

The implications of this should be obvious. If the "facts" of Regina Wender's biography are taken at face value, we are asked to believe that she went to the Soviet Union in 1933 solely to pursue a medical education, stayed five years but did not finish, abandoned medical practice for completely unknown reasons between 1938 and 1950, resumed medical practice in 1950, again for unknown reasons, completed her medical training at an East German University not available to too many non-Easterners - and by sheerest coincidence, met and married a man who just happened to have a surname identical to common name

used by all agents of that same German Communist Party during the 1940's, and about whom she provides not a particle of information. This is simply a bit too mysterious, a bit too coincidental.

In the purely speculative department, Lamphere casually mentions that the head of the German Communist espionage apparatus was named Gerhardt Richter or Wachter.

(c) There is one last factoid to mention. In 1977 or 1978, a news item in the local paper, the now defunct *Palo Alto Times*, reported that Elizabeth Targ, the daughter of Russell and Joan, had been awarded a scholarship to study in Leningrad. Elizabeth Targ was then a high school student; the paper gave no reason why she should be singled out for the scholarship, why she would want to study in the Soviet Union (then mired in the stagnation of the Brezhnev era), or any additional detail. Brady's book having been published four or five years earlier, I was aware of some of the odd aspects of Regina Wender's history. The scholarship struck me as thoroughly consistent with an ongoing affiliation of her family with the Communist bloc.

(d) Simply to round out this article, it is interesting that both Russell (Joan's husband and widower) and Elizabeth (her daughter) are controversial in their own right. Russell Targ, the son of William Targ the publisher was notoriously one of the SRI researchers gulled by Uri Geller, and thoroughly ridiculed by the CSICOP – the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (Martin Gardner, James Randi, those folks). Elizabeth has become a psychiatrist with an interest in unconventional, paranormal treatments. NIH awarded her a substantial grant to study the power of prayer on psychoses, which grant generated its own degree of controversy.

(e) Of course, nothing definite can be proven from this collage of facts, but I would lack moral courage if I did not record my own speculations. Based on all Regina Wender said and – more importantly - did not say about her past, it is my belief that she was an active member of the German Communist underground during the 30's and 40's. I think she met Bobby and Joan's father while she was in Moscow and that he was another member of the organization. (I draw that conclusion from the use of the name "Fischer" and the deliberate omission of any other data.) I think she came West with her husband to Austria on assignment. I think that the reason that she did not practice nursing during the War is that she was involved in espionage. I think the menial jobs, particularly the one as welder – what mother of young children in her right mind would choose a shipyard job over her chosen profession of nursing/medicine? – were an element of her Party responsibilities. I think she finished her medical studies in East Germany because the privileges of her Party membership gave her that right. I think that Regina concealed the real identity of Bobby's father because he was an extremely well-known Communist Party member. To finish this theme on a note of complete, unbridled speculation, I think his father may well have been Gerhard Wachter, the head of the German Communist spy apparatus.

Most of these facts have been known to me for more than a decade. (A few of them I picked up from Google while preparing this article.) I withheld them

because Joan Fischer Targ was a good, well-loved woman who did not deserve any undue exploration of her private life. Although I am not in sympathy with the beliefs in the paranormal of Russell and Elizabeth Targ, my apologies in advance for any inconvenience the publication of this note causes them.

But something important is at stake here. Bobby Fischer was one of my childhood idols. The extraordinary beauty of his chess has delighted millions. He is lost now, descended into the depths of an acute, very obnoxious paranoia. It would be one of the supreme ironies in history – not simply chess history – if Fischer, an anti-Soviet icon, were the son of a committed Communist agent(s). His mental illness may have had its roots in an upbringing in a genuinely paranoid environment. At the very least, its roots may lie in the rootless, fatherless existence he had to endure as a child as a direct result of his mother's commitment to the Communist cause – a cause which history has consigned to the waste basket of history. He deserves to have these facts brought to light by way of explanation – for while there can be no excuse for the public statements he has made, there can be understanding and even sympathy – for him, if not for his illness.



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