FROM THE ARCHIVES

RENATO LEVI

The Complicated Double-Agent is WWII's Best Kept Secret
BY DANA ROVANG, PHD

Renato Levi nearly always flew under the radar, especially in the British National Archives. Even in recent books about spies and counter-intelligence, Levi receives curt mention and specifics about his participation are often confused.[1] To be fair, Levi's files have only recently been released, and even then Levi - "Cheese," or "Lambert," or "Mr. Rose" - is only named once in his classified dossier.[2] Indeed, in his national documents, evidence of redaction is everywhere: even his codename "CHEESE" has been carefully handwritten in tiny, blocky letters over white-out, re-establishing his place in history.

In large part, this is perhaps due to the reason that Levi's story doesn't fall into the narrative of a "hero spy," and efforts to make him into one mean eliding much of the truth. To be absolutely certain, Levi was of paramount importance in establishing a spy network in Cairo that "turned the tide" of WWII in North Africa. But for much of WWII (specifically, August 2, 1941- October 17, 1943), Levi was either undergoing interrogation by the Italian authorities or in an Italian island prison.[3]

RENATO LEVI
Only surviving photo.

Also complicating his narrative are the archival files themselves, where he is alternatively referred to as "Cheese," "Mr. Rose," "Lambert," or even his German *nom du guerre*, "Roberto." As a result, teasing out Levi's story is a much more difficult task than might appear.

About Levi, his "Most Secret" files called him an "international adventurer" over his relevant status as a "British National." Notably charming, inventive, and a "natural liar,"[4] Levi's birthplace as recorded in his dossier is "Italy."[5] However the same dossier has other documents stating he was born in Split, (presumably the city across the Adriatic now in Croatia.)[6] The exact date for the latter birthplace has been redacted, but the year of 1902 is the same. As of the clandestine file's creation, he was 5'6" with light brown hair and blue eyes. Importantly, he was often referred to as a "Jew" or "Jewish," and that his motives for joining the Allied cause was "Patriotic [sic],"[7] and that he wanted to fight for the Jews. However, according to the same people, Levi's "motives are difficult to fathom." Also, he "enjoys the work for its own sake,"

and perhaps he simply enjoyed the traveling, womanizing, and overall adventuring his double-agent life afforded him.[8]

Prior to joining the Allies in 1939, Levi was reported to have lived in India, Switzerland, Italy, and Australia, in addition to holding British citizenship. His mother owned a hotel in Genoa, and he frequently used that as a home-base when he was in Italy. It was while staying in the hotel in December of 1939 that he was approached by a German I.S. Agent, "Oscar Zoller," in one account,[9] or Dr. Johannes "Hans" Travaglio (aka, Major Solms) in another.[10] Dr. Travaglio seems to be his primary contact in the German I.S., and he reportedly inquired as to his willingness to help the Germans. Levi said he was, and was sent to France. When he arrived in France in early 1940, he headed for the British Consulate, where he reported out of "patriotic" duty. While in France, he was handled by the Deuxième Bureau (the French Intelligence) until France's collapse in the mid-1940. He was then returned to Genoa.

Here, he met again with Travaglio, who introduced him to other agents: a Major Helferich and another key player who went by "Rosetti." After some discussion and planning, it was determined that Levi was to go to Egypt and set up a wireless transmitter that would message German Headquarters in Athens with encrypted messages. Levi's job

was to set up the transmitter at a secure location and recruit informants who would give him reliable "boots on the ground" information. The plan was reportedly approved by the head of Italian Intelligence, a Count Scirombo."[11]

"Paul Nicossof" was an invention of British intelligence. … This was the start of the "Cheese Network."

So, in late December 1940, just about a year after his recruitment by the Germans, Levi was off to Egypt. But while traveling through Istanbul, he was picked up by Turkish authorities for working with a gang of counterfeiters. He was apparently released 30 days later after the British stepped in, and he continued on to Cairo, arriving mid-February of that year. He was given a wireless set by the British and they established a fake informant, "Paul Nicossof." "Nicossof" was an invention of British intelligence, which began to use the wireless transmitter to communicate in encryption with Levi's Axis connections. This was the start of the "Cheese Network." While Levi was also known as "Cheese," the transmissions by the fake informant are also referred to as "Cheese." This development perhaps led to Levi's new codenames in British Intelligence communications, "Lambert" and "Mr. Rose." To the Axis forces, he and his network were known as "Roberto."

Following the establishment of

the Cheese network, Levi chose to return to Italy to meet with his German contacts. It is unclear why he felt this was necessary. He traveled through Turkey in April of 1941 on his way to Rome. He made his way back to his mother's hotel in Genoa, and then on August 2, 1941 he was arrested by Italian authorities and accused of espionage; specifically, he was accused of working with the British Intelligence and that the "Roberto" Wireless Transmitter was under the control of the British ("trasmette sotto il controllo inglese").[12] The irony is that the Italians were completely correct of their suspicions, but Levi denied this under repeat interrogations and he appealed to his German handlers for help. Rosetti and Travaglio were either unable or unwilling to assist him (it was speculated by British Intelligence that Levi knew more than he should about his German handlers' black market activities, and that may have been why they were loath to assist him).[13] He was also asked if he was Jewish. He said that he was Jewish in "origin," but that his religion was Catholic,[14] and it seems like his answer was either satisfactory or the subject was not really an issue. In October, Levi was told he would be released; instead, a few days later he was summoned to a secret court that convicted him of political crimes against the Italian state. He was sentenced to five years in prison, and shipped off to the island of Tremiti.[15] Levi served around two years of his sentence before he was liberated by British forces in August of 1943 after being transferred to San Severo on

the mainland.

Because Levi was arrested and convicted in late 1941/early 1942, the Cheese network out of Cairo took a significant hit to its credibility. One of the most interesting features of this story is that the imaginary agent, "Paul Nicossof," was able to regain and retain the trust of the Germans. Thanks to the ingenious manipulations of the British Intelligence operatives controlling the wireless, the Cheese network was back in the pink by June of 1942, just in time for "A" Force to start planting counter-intelligence prior to the commencement of Operation Bertram at El Alamein in Egypt (October, 1942). Indeed, some of the most fascinating pieces out of this sordid tale are the ways that the intelligence operatives used payment schedules (or, rather, the German's lack of payment to "Paul Nicossof") to establish credibility about the fictitious informant's information; Nicossof was portrayed as petulant and inconsistent because efforts to pay him were always unsuccessful. Indeed, his handlers credited the "unforeseen event" of the German's inability to pay "Nicossof" as the way they were able to extend his character beyond the "impasse" that would normally constitute a non-military informant. "Nicossof" could then see – rather, portray – himself as the "man who brought Rommel to Egypt," which would get him paid for his troubles at last, in addition to all the attending glory and medals.[16]

Perhaps because of the British Intelligence's efforts to make "Nicossof" convincing and that Levi was completely constant under duress in prison, the Germans never really lost faith in the Cheese operative network. More likely, they were starved for information, and Cheese held the only promise for any intelligence about the Middle East. Tellingly, the Germans blamed the Italians for the confinement of their only key agent in the Middle East, Renato Levi. For his part, Levi felt that the Italians were jealous of the German's "success" in establishing an informant network after "Count Scrirombo's" own attempts to do so had failed.[17] For whatever the reason, the Germans trusted Levi, but he never broke or compromised his duty to the Allied forces.

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Others have looked at these newly declassified documents in the attempt to press Levi into the service of a "Hero Spy" figure. In truth, Levi was a far more complicated figure and these whitewash narratives don't succeed in allowing his experiences all their complexity. And most interestingly, his story reveals much about the inner workings of the German Abwehr and the nature of the Italian Intelligence operations.

His handlers conjectured that it was unlikely the German and Italian Intelligence bureaus had a great deal of communication between them, and the Germans, in spite of their full faith in Levi, were overly satisfied with his original purpose of establishing a wireless transmitter network, to their detriment.[18]

To read his declassified documents, Levi's ultimate fate is unclear. It is true that the Cheese network was in full swing throughout the war, and many have credited "Cheese" with hoodwinking the Germans in grand fashion on many occasions. Perhaps Levi was again affiliated with Cheese after his release, perhaps not. Regardless, Renato Levi – lover of travel, intrigue, and a really good lie – did a remarkable service to the Allied forces by instituting one of the best and most productive counter-intelligence operations of WWII, and he kept it all safe.

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Originally Published 7/15/2015

FOOTNOTES
1) Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 36-38; Hervie Haufler, *The Spies Who Never Were* (Open Road Media, 2013), Chapter 13 notes.

2) "Report on Cheese, Appendix B", p. 12 (KV-2-1133-2: 45).

3) "History of Rose," p. 8 (BNA-KV-2-1133-1: 50).

4) "Report on Cheese," p. 4 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 37).

5) "Report on Cheese," p. 1 (BNA- KV-2-1133-2: 34).

6) "A.D. Cheese," p.1 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 65).

7) "A.D. Cheese," p. 1 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 65).

8) "Report on Cheese," pp. 3 -4 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 36-37).

9) "Report on Cheese," pp. 3 -4 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 36-37).

10) "Report on Cheese," p.1 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 34).

11) "Report on Cheese," p.1 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 34).

12) "History of Mr. Rose," p. 8 (BNA-KV-2-1133-1: 50).

13) Major J.C. Robinson, "The History of Mr. Rose from June 1941-March 1944, 4th April, 1944", p. 15, (BNA-KV-2-1133-1: 57).

14) "History of Mr. Rose, p. 23 (BNA-KV-2-1133-1: 67).

15) "The History of Mr. Rose," p. 16, (BNA-KV-2-1133-1: 58).

16) "Report on Cheese," p. 8 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 41).

17) "History of Mr. Rose," p. 20 (BNA-KV-2-1133-1: 62).

18) "History of Mr. Rose," pp. 21-22, (BNA-KV-2-1133-1: 63-64).

For additional resources and a select bibliography, please visit Levi's page at www.obscurehistories.com

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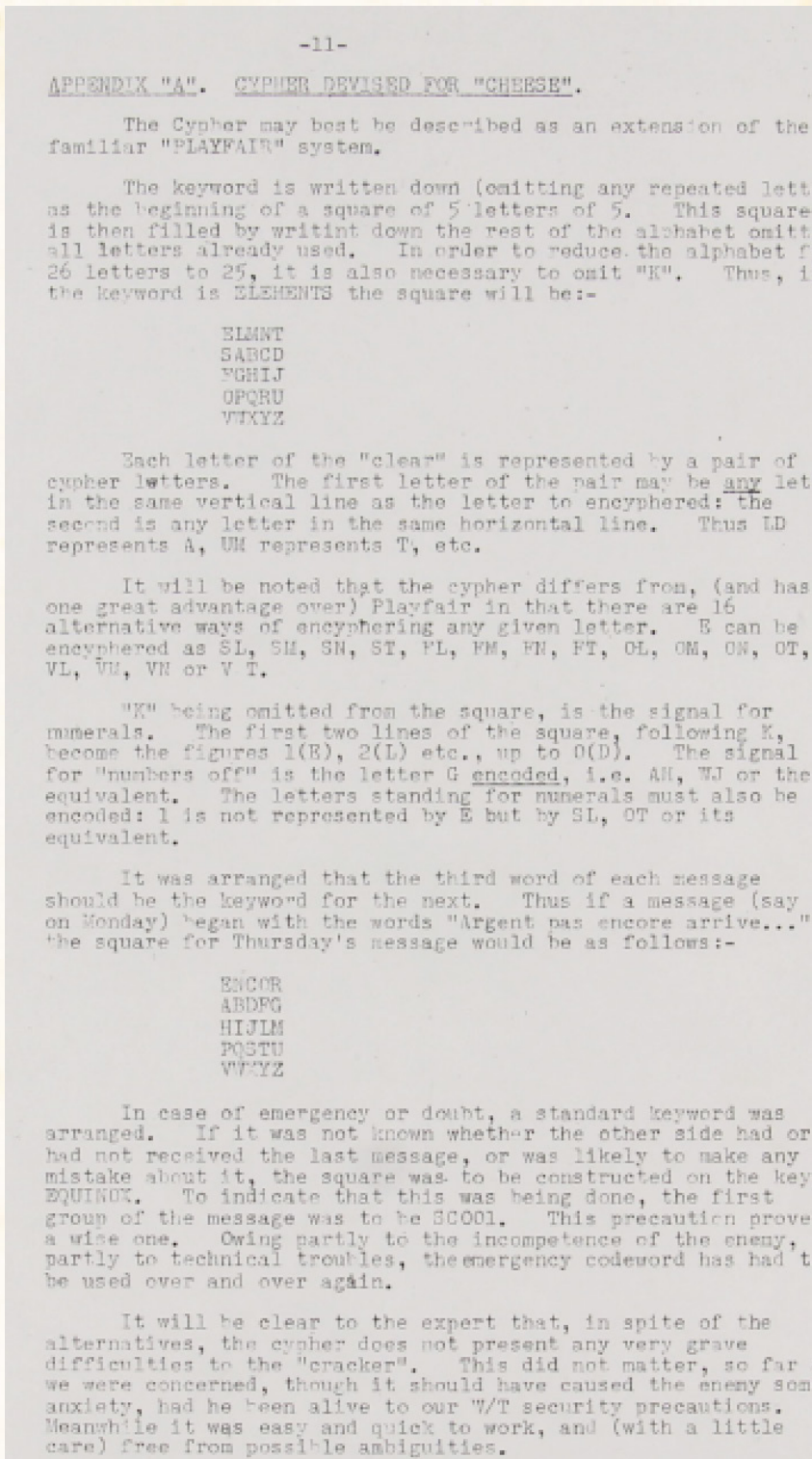-11-

APPENDIX "A". CYPHER DEVISED FOR "CHEESE".

The Cypher may best be described as an extension of the familiar "PLAYFAIR" system.

The keyword is written down (omitting any repeated letters) as the beginning of a square of 5 letters of 5. This square is then filled by writing down the rest of the alphabet omitting all letters already used. In order to reduce the alphabet from 26 letters to 25, it is also necessary to omit "K". Thus, if the keyword is ELEMENTS the square will be:-

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ELMNT
SABCD
FGHIJ
OPQRU
VWXYZ
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Each letter of the "clear" is represented by a pair of cypher letters. The first letter of the pair may be any letter in the same vertical line as the letter to encyphered: the second is any letter in the same horizontal line. Thus LD represents A, UM represents T, etc.

It will be noted that the cypher differs from, (and has one great advantage over) Playfair in that there are 16 alternative ways of encyphering any given letter.   E can be encyphered as SL, SM, SN, ST, FL, FM, FN, FT, OL, OM, ON, OT, VL, VM, VN or V T.

"K" being omitted from the square, is the signal for numerals. The first two lines of the square, following K, become the figures 1(E), 2(L) etc., up to 0(D). The signal for "numbers off" is the letter G encoded, i.e. AH, WJ or the equivalent. The letters standing for numerals must also be encoded: 1 is not represented by E but by SL, OT or its equivalent.

It was arranged that the third word of each message should be the keyword for the next. Thus if a message (say on Monday) began with the words "Argent pas encore arrive..." the square for Thursday's message would be as follows:-

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ENCOR
ABDFG
HIJLM
PQSTU
VWXYZ
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In case of emergency or doubt, a standard keyword was arranged. If it was not known whether the other side had or had not received the last message, or was likely to make any mistake about it, the square was to be constructed on the key EQUINOX. To indicate that this was being done, the first group of the message was to be SCOO1. This precaution proved a wise one. Owing partly to the incompetence of the enemy, partly to technical troubles, the emergency codeword has had to be used over and over again.

It will be clear to the expert that, in spite of the alternatives, the cypher does not present any very grave difficulties to the "cracker". This did not matter, so far as we were concerned, though it should have caused the enemy some anxiety, had he been alive to our W/T security precautions. Meanwhile it was easy and quick to work, and (with a little care) free from possible ambiguities.

Appendix A: CYPHER DESIGNED FOR CHEESE
"Report on Cheese," p.11 (BNA-KV-2-1133-2: 34).