

AU Talk, May 25, "The Catcher Who Was A Spy" by Tony Mastandrea & Bob Dauer

Winston Churchill's famous remark about the Soviet Union could definitely be applied to the elusive and eccentric baseball player - namely, Morris (Moe) Berg. Just exchange the "it's" for a "he." "It's a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."

Moe Berg played 15 seasons in the Major Leagues, jumping right from Princeton University to the Brooklyn Robins, later called Dodgers. His first contract was for \$5,000, which is equivalent to about \$65,000 in today's dollars. After Brooklyn, Moe spent his first five years with the Chicago White Sox and his last five with the Boston Red Sox- in between he spent time with the Washington Senators and the Cleveland Indians.

Moe majored in classical and romantic languages at Princeton – IE: Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, French (his best foreign language), Italian and Spanish. Later on when it was absolutely necessary for his spying endeavors, he picked up German and Japanese. The joke about Moe around the baseball cages was that he knew seven or eight languages, but could hit in none of them, especially the curve ball. This bit of humor is not entirely true, for Moe hit lifetime, and often playing with an injured leg, a respectable, .243. In fact, in 1929, his best season, he hit .287, and received 4 votes for MVP honors. Incidentally, Moe was an outstanding defensive catcher, throwing out almost 50% of the stealing runners.

Moe had many idiosyncratic eccentricities - namely, no one could touch any of the 8-10 papers, several in foreign languages, before he read them -if anyone did, he would become irate and throw all the papers out and buy new ones. The papers were "alive," he said, and talked to him personally. He also dressed the same way every day - a black suit, a black tie, black shoes and a white shirt. Incidentally, he would have 7 or 8 of this same attire in his clothing closet. These are just two examples of his eccentric behavior, but he was just following in the footsteps of his tyrannical father, who never came to any of his games, and his weird doctor brother, Sam, and paranoid sister, Ethel.

After his playing days Moe was recruited by the OSS, the forerunner of the CIA, to primarily find out if the Germans were ahead of the United States in developing an atomic bomb. After much spy work in Italy, more was sent into Zurich, Switzerland to hear a lecture by eminent German physicist, Werner Heisenberg, who was considered the leading figure in developing the bomb. Moe was instructed to kill Heisenberg on the spot, if he felt that Heisenberg gave any hint that the Germans were advancing in the construction of the "bomb." Heisenberg did not, and therefore, was not assassinated. Incidentally, the OSS never appreciated Moe's "spy work" in Italy and presented him with a bill for \$21,000 for untold expenses. Such gratitude is overwhelming!

Moe loved three things in an extreme way - books and "learning for the sake of learning," spy work and baseball. When people told him, he had misplaced his "genius," he replied, quite emphatically, "I rather be a ballplayer than a Supreme Court justice."

Moe fell out of bed one night in 1972 tripping over the many books surrounding his presence and died in Newark Hospital. Some of his closing words to a nurse were - "how did the Mets do today?" They won.