

## “The Thing” and I October 4

Much has been written about the “Great Seal Bug,” a Resonance Cavity Microphone Retro-reflector, also referred to as “The Thing.” This is the story of events leading to the discovery of the device in the U.S. Ambassador’s Moscow’s residence in 1952 by Department of State (DOS) technical security officer, Joseph Bezjian and the embassy resident personnel officer, Sam Janey.

Immediately following WWII, the diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union were such that each side was wary of the true intentions of the other. Secret intelligence, whatever the means, was of immense value in this time of tension.

The “Great Seal Bug” took a rather circuitous journey to the Ambassador’s residence, where it was eventually discovered. U.S. Ambassador Averell Harriman accepted a wood carving of the Great Seal of the United States, which would serve to hide the device for many years, as a gift of friendship from the Soviets in 1945. The gift was never on display at the Embassy and was likely stored in several locations before finding a permanent home in the library of the new U.S. Ambassador at the time, Alan Kirk, as a part of the home’s renovation in 1949.

Joseph Bezjian’s recollection begins in the fall of 1951 when an American Signal Corps officer, acting on a tip, was conducting security monitoring activities on the third floor of the U.S. Chancery; he intercepted a conversation from within the office of the U.S. Ambassador on a wideband UHF receiver. Immediately upon being sent to the ambassador’s office, the officer’s assistant was dispatched to walk throughout the ambassador’s office saying, “This is the north corner, this is the east corner, this is the south corner.” The signal quickly disappeared and within a few weeks DOS technical security personnel had conducted a further search for unwanted transmitters, literally taking the room apart but failing to discover any devices.

Arriving in Moscow in September 1952, Bezjian conducted a second complete technical survey of the Chancery. Bezjian apparently had concluded that another target for Soviet exploitation might be the Ambassador’s residence – Spaso House. At this point, he began phase two of his technical survey and, “With the

consent of Ambassador George Kennan, Bezjian moved from his apartment into Spaso House, presumably as a house guest of the Ambassador.”

After three days as a “house guest,” Bezjian launched a plan with the ambassador with the intent of flushing out the existence of any listening devices. In accordance with the plan, Sam Janey covertly delivered Bezjian’s technical survey equipment to the residence, using his weekly meeting with the ambassador as a cover. Upon Janey’s arrival for his meeting, the gear was immediately secured in a safe, “the combination to which had been changed the previous evening by Bezjian.” With the means of detection in place, all that was missing was the bait.

Later that evening, Janey returned to the residence under the ruse of a social visit with Bezjian. After dinner the two men adjourned to the Blue Room on the first floor of the residence, and as Bezjian would later recall, enjoyed a taste of the Ambassador’s cognac as they awaited the arrival of the ambassador’s secretary. By pre-arrangement with Kennan, the secretary was soon summoned to Spaso House to take dictation of a “classified” memo for Kennan. Thus, the Soviets were lured into the trap that would reveal the existence of “The Thing.”

Upon the secretary’s arrival at the residence, Bezjian and Janey removed the technical surveillance equipment from storage and proceeded to their listening post in the attic of the residence. In the meantime, Ambassador Kennan began to dictate the “classified” communication in the library.

Within moments the equipment was picking up the ambassador’s voice and the noise of the equipment the secretary was using in the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor library. In his own words, “Bezjian hesitated to enter the study without informing the ambassador that he was ‘on the air’ because of a friendly bet he had with the Ambassador for a wooden Russian doll for every microphone Bezjian uncovered.” Afraid to enter the library himself, as the ambassador might give away the discovery by asking Bezjian if he had discovered something, Bezjian sent Janey into the room with a scribbled note informing him to continue dictating the phony message.

Next, Bezjian quietly entered with his equipment and proceeded to the back of the room where the signal strength was strongest. Nearby was a table with several items on it. On hand signals from Bezjian, Janey removed (one by one) several items from the room while the ambassador and secretary continued the deception. Based on the signal strength he was still receiving, Bezjian determined

the likely source of the signal was the carving of the Great Seal of the United States hanging on the back wall of the room.

Removing the seal from the wall, Bezjian had it placed on an overstuffed chair in the center of the room. Returning to the wall, he detected a strong signal in the left rear corner of the wall and a diminished signal strength as he walked the length of the room. The fact the voice strength was strongest near the seal confirmed Bezjian's suspicion. At this point, only 4 minutes had passed since Bezjian first entered the room. As he attempted further tests the signal suddenly disappeared after Bezjian accidentally bumped it with the antenna of his equipment.

With the signal now off the air, Bezjian informed the ambassador that a device was without a doubt in the seal. The signal once again momentarily reappeared before disappearing for good. Bezjian was certain the Soviets were aware their device had been discovered by the Americans.

At this point, Bezjian requested everyone leave the room as he inspected the wood carving. His request was a precaution against any possible explosive booby-trap he might set off during the physical inspection. As Bezjian disassembled the seal, he carefully pried it apart and discovered the device concealed in a hollowed out cavity of the carving. Bezjian proceeded to wrap the listening device in aluminum foil.

Next, under Bezjian's direction, he and Janey demolished the rear wall of the library in search of possible implanted activation equipment. By 0300, no additional equipment was discovered and the wall had been "... excavated in spots to the basic construction. Sounds of hammering were carrying throughout the neighborhood. A Marine guard was called in and stationed in the study."

Having met their objective of finding the device, Janey left the residence. Bezjian retired to his quarters and slept with the device under his pillow and the seal under his bed. When he awoke he and Ambassador Kennan returned to the Chancery with the seal on the floor of the car and the device in the Ambassador's pocket.

At the Chancery the device was photographed and immediately diplomatic pouched to the Department of State Regional Security headquarters in Paris,

France. Mr. Bezjian then returned to Spaso house and completed the task of deconstructing the wall to satisfy the need to determine if any other devices remained. None were found.

The device was quickly delivered to the U.S. and immediately shown to President Truman. At the president's direction, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was tasked to conduct a formal espionage investigation. The Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) was tasked to determine how the device functioned and to design a countermeasure device that could be used to activate similar devices. Six weeks later the NRL completed its task and countermeasure equipment was delivered to Moscow. No additional devices of this type were ever found.

(U//FOUO) The precise date when the device first started collecting U.S. secrets has never been determined. DSS' best estimate is that the device was placed in the residence just before Ambassador Kirk arrived in 1949. As part of a routine security check in 1951, DSS had scanned the carving using a metal detector with negative results. Upon further inspection, the size of the interior cavity housing "The Thing" appeared larger than necessary and DSS hypothesized that it at one time contained a similar device of larger size and using a lower frequency. This device was likely removed prior to the technical inspections that had been performed in 1951.

(U//FOUO) While Bezjian's summary leaves the reader to speculate if the Ambassador ever paid off his bet, it is indisputable that Bezjian and Janey's real reward that night was the discovery itself.

*Sources: "Narrative Report of Cavity Resonator Discovery", October 24, 1968 as redacted by Department of State January 2018.*



1 (U) The actual Great Seal on display at the Department of State, Diplomatic Security Service, Crystal City, VA. 2018 Photo taken by Mark Nixon, Center for Cryptologic History



1 (U) Spaso House, the official residence of the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union 1933-present. Photo credit U.S. Embassy Moscow Photographer Valeriy Yevseyev

Author Name: Mark Nixon