

# On the Trail of Trebitsch Lincoln, Triple Agent

By Bernard Wasserstein

I CANNOT say quite when I first heard of Trebitsch Lincoln. He is one of those types, notorious in their own day, who sink rapidly into obscurity after their deaths, sometimes hovering briefly in the footnotes of history. I believe that the outline of Trebitsch Lincoln's bizarre story was recounted to me some years ago in Jerusalem by the editor of the Encyclopedia Judaica, Geoffrey Wigoder, whose encyclopedic knowledge of such historical byways is unrivaled. From him I heard, with incredulity, of the birth in 1879 of Ignacz Timotheus Tre-

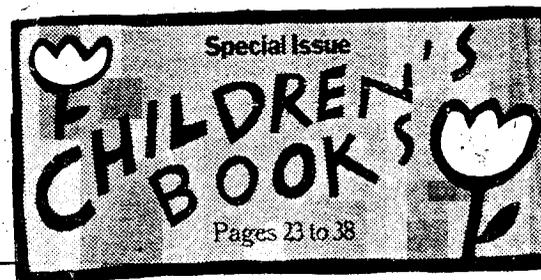
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bitsch in a small provincial town in Hungary, of his conversions from Judaism to various sects of Christianity and then to Buddhism, of his wanderings from Hungary to China, of his adoption of the name Lincoln (the first of more than a dozen noms de guerre), of his election to the British House of Commons and of his activity as a German spy in both

world wars. But, in spite of the fantastic nature of the tale, little remained in my memory save a dim recollection that the man was somehow mixed up in something scandalous (like the man who fixed the World Series in 1919).

Late one afternoon in August 1984 I was imprisoned in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford by heavy rain — a not unusual occurrence in Oxford in August. Having no work at hand, and it being too late to order up further books from the stacks, I took to browsing among the supremely boring items Bodley's librarian chooses to make available on the open shelves. My eye fell on the hundred or so red and green volumes of the "Index to the General Correspondence of the Foreign Office" —

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enthraling reading matter, at any rate for a historian on a wet afternoon. For reasons the psychological mechanics of which are still not clear to me, I decided to look up the name Trebitsch Lincoln. I started to read while waiting for the storm to pass. That was more than three years ago, and the tempest has not abated yet.

Searching at random I came across entries for Trebitsch in almost every year between 1921 and 1938. These were frequently of a piquant nature, tantalizing by reason of their brevity. Thus the entry for 1923: "LINCOLN, Trebitsch (alias Patrick Keelan) Activities in connection with Chinese deputation to General Ludendorff respecting Sino-German relations."

Or for 1924: "LINCOLN, Trebitsch (alias Trautwein) Alleged sale of bogus German military plans to French authorities."

As I moved into the volumes dealing with the 1930's, the arena of activity appeared to shift.

1931: "Initiated as Buddhist priest."

1937: "Japanese propaganda activity."

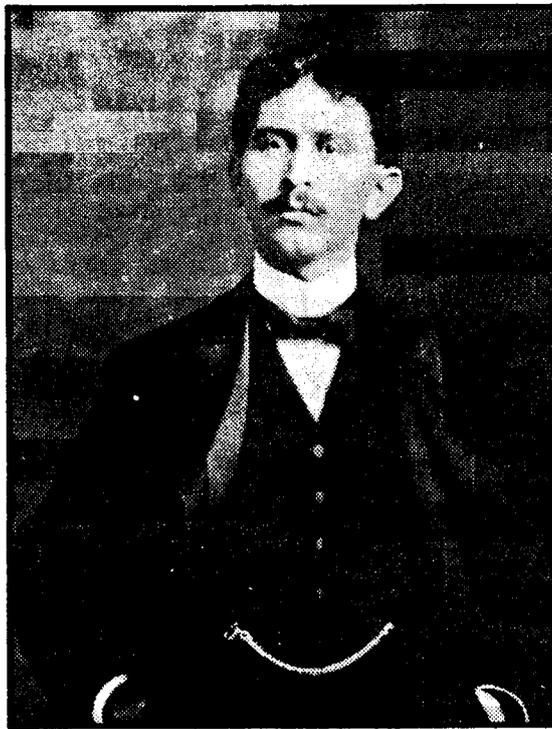
1938: "Activity in Tibet."

At 7 P.M. the library closed and I was thrust out into the rain. Cycling away, I pondered the meaning of the frequent changes of name, the apparent movement from Europe to the Far East and the seeming combination of religious and political intrigue. As I considered the matter further during that weekend, it seemed wise to dismiss the man as a colorful but unimportant confidence trickster or adventurer.

**B**UT the next week, finding myself in the Public Record Office (the British national archive) in Kew, I resolved to check the Foreign Office files to find out whether the apparently sensational entries in the index were reflected in the Government documents themselves. Long experience with such materials (many of which are shredded by Government "weeder," whose destructive capabilities would on occasion put even Lieut. Col. Oliver North to shame) had taught me to be highly skeptical of finding anything at all. To my amazement I found that the index entries were the tip of a vast iceberg of British Government documentation on Trebitsch Lincoln stretching back to 1906. The contents, however, did not quench my curiosity. If anything, they increased my perplexity. For they opened a window into a world of such exotic and convoluted conspiratorial activity that it seemed impossible to disentangle truth from rumor, propaganda stunts or psychological warfare.

I returned to Oxford more puzzled than ever, bemused as to why several governments had involved themselves with this man for more than three decades and wondering whether it was really worth my while to try to find out. I had half resolved to banish Trebitsch Lincoln from my mind altogether when a second chance discovery embroiled me deeper in his affairs. Once again it occurred in the Bodleian Library, to which I had returned with the intention of devoting myself to my more conventional scholarly vocations. Passing one day through Duke Humphrey's reading room, the ancient heart of the library, I happened to recall that I had read somewhere that the Bodleian had recently acquired the archives of some missionary society; Trebitsch, I remembered, had briefly served as a missionary in Canada around the turn of the century. I made inquiries and was directed across the road to the hideously ugly pile known as the New Bodleian, where modern historical papers are kept. It was a long shot. After all, hundreds of missionary societies had existed and it seemed unlikely, to say the least, that any documentation about an obscure missionary who had worked briefly in Montreal around 1900 should turn up in Oxford eight decades later.

I found that the papers of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Among the Jews had recently been deposited in the New Bodleian and were open to readers. The society had main-



FROM "THE SECRET LIVES OF TREBITSCH LINCOLN" / MCGILL UNIVERSITY  
Trebitsch Lincoln in Montreal, 1901.

tained a Canadian section, of which a few bundles of papers were extant. To my astonishment I found that they included a detailed and highly circumstantial account of the short career in the society of the "Revd. I. T. Trebitsch." These contemporary papers gave a vivid picture of his spiritual wrappings as well as of certain financial irregularities in his early life.

For the first time I felt I had begun to penetrate beyond the curtain of bluff and bombast behind which Trebitsch, in his later career as spy, concealed his real self from scrutiny. True, these papers by themselves were not the key to the mystery of his personality. But they persuaded me that here was a problem in historical psychology that it would be worthwhile to unravel. What was at first curiosity had by now grown into genuine interest; eventually, I must confess, it was to develop into a virtual obsession as I stripped away veil after veil shrouding the truth about Trebitsch.

Over the next year I transformed myself from historian to detective, scouring archives, plaguing librarians and carrying my inquiries to more than a dozen countries. I was able to persuade the recalcitrant Hungarian authorities to make available to me Budapest police records disclosing Trebitsch's early career as a juvenile criminal. Using the admirable provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, I obtained hundreds of pages of photocopies drawn from the case files of the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and other American intelligence agencies. A loophole in the much more strict British laws governing access to official records enabled me to see closed Home Office records (including some Scotland Yard and M.I.5 papers) concerning Trebitsch.

So I was able to build up an authentic and verifiable picture of his life — surely the most extraordinary life in the history of modern espionage. But one fundamental aspect continued to elude me. Apart from a few snippets of data garnered from archives of the Budapest Drama Academy, I possessed little reliable information about Trebitsch's youth. How would it be possible for me to explain his later development without some examination of the formative influences on his character of his family and early surroundings? For a time I ignored the problems, comforting myself with Evelyn Waugh's airy dismissal (in his autobiography, "A Little Learning") of the common notion that the events of early childhood determine the patterns of adult life. Would it really be helpful, after all, to know whether Freud was toilet-trained at the age of 1, Einstein moonstruck at 2, or that little Niccolò

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# Trebitsch Lincoln

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Machiavelli unscrupulously manipulated the affairs of his playmates at 3? Even if such information were available, would not such an approach risk falling into the trap of hindsight — of seeing a false significance in trivial events merely because of their superficial connection with adult characteristics? Nevertheless, this gap in my evidence bothered me and I was at a loss as to how to deal with it.

It happened that I had been corresponding for some time with John Greppin, an expert in Armenian linguistics who teaches at Cleveland State University in Ohio. The subject of our correspondence was the ethnography of Palestinian gypsies. In October 1984, when I went on temporary assignment to Jerusalem, I wrote to Mr. Greppin to give him some trivial information on the local gypsies. Meanwhile, I had found out that a younger brother of Trebitsch Lincoln had emigrated around 1910 from Hungary to the United States and had settled in Cleveland, where he established a Hungarian socialist newspaper. Beyond that I knew nothing, but I thought it worth asking Mr. Greppin whether it might be possible to trace any descendants of this man who might still live in Cleveland.

**W**HAT Mr. Greppin (whom I have never met) made of such a strange request I do not know. But he is evidently a person of tolerant spirit and rare resource. For by return mail I heard that in Cleveland he had indeed located a woman, then in her late 80's, who was Trebitsch Lincoln's niece. She not only responded to my many questions, but also very generously gave me a copy of a manuscript about her father, her notorious uncle and the Trebitsch family, which she had set to paper when she was a college student in the 1920's.

A little later a no less miraculous coincidence brought me further help. One evening, at a concert in the Jerusalem Theater, I happened to meet my old friend Elizabeth Eppler, a noted authority on the history of the Jews in Hungary, who had recently settled in Jerusalem. When I mentioned that I was writing a book about Trebitsch Lincoln, she responded by fishing out of her handbag the address of another niece of his, then in her 90's, whose daughter, she informed me, was one of her greatest friends. She also said that living in London was an equally venerable nephew of Trebitsch.

When I returned to England shortly afterward, I had the pleasure of meeting these people. Both of them could remem-

ber their uncle with remarkable precision and clarity. Since they had known him well (and in the case of the nephew had even worked with him during Trebitsch's short-lived career as a Rumanian oil company promoter), their testimony was invaluable. Moreover, through them I was introduced to Trebitsch's granddaughter, who, over lunch in the charming restaurant that she and her husband ran in Greenwich, provided me with more vital information.

By combining the new evidence given me by Trebitsch's relatives with what I already knew from other sources, I was in a position to attempt to draw at least the outlines of an account of his childhood and adolescence — and of the relationship of his early experiences to the wayward odyssey of his adult life.

My quest for the truth about Trebitsch Lincoln carried me even farther from my usual beat. I little expected, when I first looked up Trebitsch's name in the Bodleian Library, that a year or so later I would be immersed in the records of the Special Branch of the Shanghai Municipal Police, let alone that these documents would furnish me with the last crucial set of clues that would enable me finally to unravel the mystery of Trebitsch Lincoln.

I discovered exactly how he moved from a bohemian student life in Budapest to a Presbyterian mission house in Montreal; how he got himself elected Liberal Member of the British Parliament for Darlington; how his speculations in Rumanian petroleum ended in disaster; how he defrauded his English benefactors and set himself up as a double (or rather a triple) agent during World War I; how he fled to the United States, was arrested, escaped from jail in Brooklyn and baffled and exasperated the police as he eluded capture, cheekily issuing taunts and challenges to his would-be captors through the New York press; how he returned to Europe and emerged as a member of the rightist German revolutionary government of Wolfgang Kapp in 1920; how he encountered the young Hitler, who had rushed up from Munich to join in that putsch; how, after the collapse of the coup, he combined with German, Hungarian and Russian reactionaries to form the "White International," a right-wing equivalent of Lenin's Red International dedicated to the cause of revolution everywhere; how he then betrayed his fellow conspirators, fled to China, appointed himself abbot of a Buddhist monastery and became deeply immersed in political intrigues in Tibet and north China; and how finally, in the last and most extraordinary phase of his life, he re-emerged in the eerie



Trebitsch Lincoln, alias Abbot Chao Kung, Shanghai, 1931.

twilight of wartime Japanese-occupied Shanghai in his old role as an undercover agent, this time for both the Nazis and the Japanese.

Beyond tracking the picaresque story of a man who could bamboozle David Lloyd George, J. Edgar Hoover and Heinrich Himmler, I tried to achieve another level of understanding. The core of the mystery seemed to me the enigma of Trebitsch's inner life. What, if any, were his true loyalties? What was he really up to? Did his conscience sit easy as he labored for the Axis while his son was tortured by the Japanese in Java and his brother was murdered in Auschwitz? Drawing on my multifarious sources, I was able to reconstruct this hidden dimension of personality and to explain the messianic delusion that ultimately engulfed him.

...

The later part of Trebitsch Lincoln's life was governed by a severe manic depressive psychosis that produced alternating rhythms of gloom, pessimism and paranoia on the one hand, and of supernal omnipotence, euphoria, gregariousness and elation on the other. The cycle of moods found expression in periods of monkish withdrawal and despair, followed by manic phases of hyperactivity, prophetic claims and compulsive political *folies de grandeur*. The messianic manic-depressive syndrome provides the key to an explanation of Trebitsch Lincoln's life, and in particular of the link between his inner construction of the world and external reality. But he cannot be simply dismissed as a madman. On the contrary, the remarkable thing about him — and the most telling commentary on the world in which he lived — is that he was able to operate on a plane of apparent rationality throughout his career as a confidence trickster. Otherwise, how could he have been elected to the British Parliament? Otherwise, how could he have been appointed a member of the German Government? Otherwise, how could the most senior figures in the Buddhist

hierarchy in China have accepted him into their midst with affection and pride?

During World War II, even the chief Gestapo agent in the Far East, SS Col. Joseph Meisinger (a hard-bitten Nazi who was to be executed in 1947 for war crimes, and who boasted that he trusted no one — "Sometimes I even have doubts about myself!"), accepted Trebitsch's fantastic pretensions with a naive credulity. Meisinger recommended Trebitsch's recruitment to his ring of agents and became embroiled in a bitter controversy over the issue with the top echelons of the Nazi security apparatus in Berlin. Far from being a disadvantage, Trebitsch's specific form of madness thus thrust him insistently forward in the world of the great dictators — a world where madness had gained an ascendancy over large portions of humanity.

Trebitsch Lincoln died in Shanghai in October 1943. Yet, even in death, he retains a capacity to astound, and I suppose it is possible he may yet rise from his grave in the Shanghai Municipal Cemetery, in the form of a posthumous cache of papers, to contradict everything I have found out about him. Notwithstanding that faint possibility, I felt, by the end of my researches,

that my archival burrowings and merciless badgering of witnesses, along with some outstanding strokes of good fortune, had yielded the closest accessible approach to the true history of a false messiah. □

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