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 Trebitsch 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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enthralling reading matter, at any rate for a histo-
rian on a wet afternoon. For reasons the psychologi-
cal 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 tem-
pest has not abated yet.
Searching at random I came across entries for
Trebitsch in almost every year between 1921 and 1938. The
broader the frequency of a dossier’s nature, tantalizing by reason of their brevity. Thus
the entry for 1923: “LINCOLN, Trebitsch (alias Patrick
Keelan) Activities in connection with Chinese deputa-
tion to General Ludendorff respecting Sino-Ger-
man relations.”
Or for 1924: “LINCOLN, Trebitsch (alias Trautwein) Alleged sale of bogus German military
plans to French authorities.”
At 7 P.M. the library closed and I was thrust
out into the rain. Cycling away, I pondered the
planstoFrenchauthorities."
As Iconsideredthematterfurtherduring
that weekend, it seemed wise to dismiss the man as
a colorful but unimportant confidence trickster or
adventurer.

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UT the next week, finding myself in the
Public Record Office (the British na-
tional archive) in Kew, I resolved to
check the Foreign Office files to find out
whether the apparently sensational en-
tries in the index were reflected in the
Government documents themselves. Long experience with such
materials (many of which are shredded by Govern-
ment “weeder’s,” 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, how-
ever, did not quench my curiosity. If anything, they
increased my perplexity. For they opened a win-
dow into a world of such exotic and convoluted con-
spiratorial 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 in-
volved this man for reasons which stretched through
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 alto-
together 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
hope of distracting myself to my more con-
ventional scholarly vocations. Passing one day
through Duke Humphrey’s reading room, the an-
cient heart of the library, I happened to recall that I
had read somewhere that the Bodleian had re-
cently acquired the archives of some missionary
society; Trebitsch, I remembered, had briefly served
as a missionary in Canada around the turn of the
century. The Tahiti Missionary 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 un-
likely, 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-
tained a Canadian section, within which a few bundles of
papers were extant. To my astonishment I found
that they included a detailed and highly circum-
stantial account of the short career in the society of
the “Rev. I. T. Trebitsch.” These contemporary
papers gave a vivid picture of this spiritual world-
tings 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, con-
cealed his real self from scrutiny. True, these
papers by themselves were not the key to the mys-
tery 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, sifting archives, plugging
libraries and carrying my imagination across the
adventures of many nations. I was able to persuade the rec-
citrant Hungarian authorities to make available to me
Budapest police records disclosing Trebitsch’s early
career as a juvenile criminal. Using the ad-
mirable provisions of the Freedom of Information
Act, I obtained hundreds of pages of photographs
drawn from the case files of the F.B.I., the C.I.A.
and other American intelligence agencies. A loop-
hole 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.15 papers) concerning Trebitsch.
So I was able to build up an authentic and veri-
fiable picture of his life—surely the most extraor-
dinary 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 pos-
sessed 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 ig-
nored the problems, comforting myself with Eve-
lyn 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 moanstruck at 2, or that little Niccolò
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Machiavelli unscrupulously manipulated the affairs of his playmates at 37 F. 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 own education 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 social organization. Beyond that I knew nothing, but I thought it worth asking Mr. Greppin whether it might be possible to locate any descendant of this man who might still live in Cleveland.

What Mr. Greppin (whom I have never met) told me 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 many requests for information, 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 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 remembered their uncle with remarkable precision and clarity. Since they knew him well (and in the case of the nephew had even worked with him during Trebitsch’s short-lived career as a Hungarian oil company employee), 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 farther and farther. It seemed that every word I read 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 Dartington; how his speculations in Rumanian petroleum ended in disaster; how he defrauded his English benefactors and set himself up as a dou-}

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