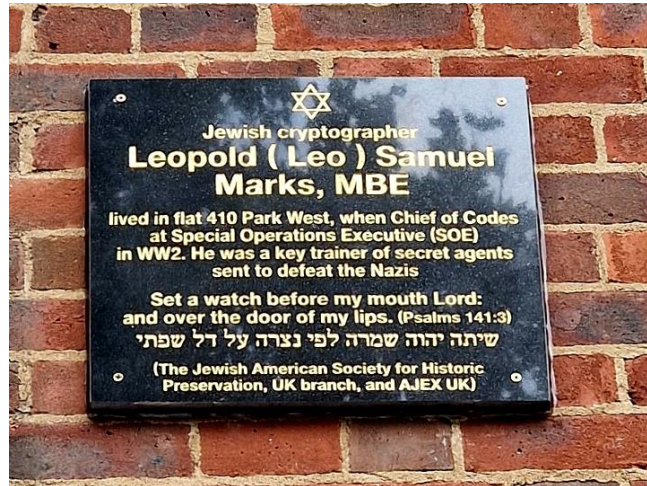


Leopold (Leo) Samuel Marks

1920-2001

Poet, Writer, Spy



A marker is, at best, a tiny window into the gray, misty expanse of the past that shaped our todays. The fuller story of life, love and...have to be written.

Leo Marks, was born in London to an Orthodox Jewish family. His father, Benjamin Marks, was the co-owner of an antiquarian book shop at 84 Charing Cross Road. He was an only child. The family lived above the shop in a small flat.

The bookstore became famous when it was selected as the setting for a 1987 movie, a well-received love story, 84 Charing Cross. The film, produced by Mel Brooks, starred Anne Bancroft, Anthony (Tony) Hopkins, Judi Dench and Mercedes Ruehl.

Fans still wander by the London address. They know little about the Marks family or Leo. The bookstore is long gone. It is a McDonald today.

Living in a world of books, Leo read Edgar Allan Poe's mystery/detective story, the Gold Bug. He was bitten. The search to unravel the hidden fascinated young

Leo. Though only eight years old, precocious, brilliant, he deciphered his father's hidden pricing code in the books that Mark's and Co. sold. His mind, working like a computer, absorbing clues, hints, and signals, seeing unseen patterns, to understand the secret meanings of words.

It was a developed, a refined skill that made him seem to others to be the square peg who refused to fit in the round hole. That misfit characteristic would prove of vital importance to the British War effort during World War II.

Marks was conscripted and trained as a cryptographer in 1942. He did not fit into the needs of the regular army. His genius at code breaking quickly moved him to a new super-secret unit, the Special Operations Executive, S.O.E. S.O.E. earned a new title. They were called, Brilliant Amateurs.

S.O.E. was tasked to train agents to operate behind enemy lines, support resistance groups, becoming deadly spies for the British. The agents transmitted vital information back to London using codes. An agent's life was about six weeks before the Abwehr, the Nazi counter-espionage unit discovered them. The Nazis cracked their codes and liquidated the spies.

Marks recognized the flaw in the British coding system that helped the Nazis. British spies were taught to use popular poems as their ciphers for their radio-based transmissions. The poems were generally easily recognizable English language poems.

The Nazis were well educated. They knew the English language, English culture, and poetry. With greater and greater ease, they broke the British messages. It proved a direct route to capturing, interrogating, killing and even turning British Agents into double agents.

Marks developed sophisticated countermeasures, such as work out keys and one-time pad usages. It was a simple Marks innovation that vastly increased the Nazi counter-intelligence frustration.

Marks began training agents to use original poems for their coded transmissions. He wrote many of the poems that the agents would be able to memorize. The Nazis had incredible difficulty in breaking them.

In 1943, Marks suspected the Dutch British spy network had been compromised.

His warnings, his memorandums to his superiors in S.O.E. met only with deaf responses. The deafness probably resulted in the death of at least 50 agents.

Marks was summoned before Brigadier Colin Gubbins to answer for his disruptive memorandums.

Gubbins was described as a “real Highland toughie, bloody brilliant... The general's eyes reflected the crossed swords on his shoulders, warning all comers not to cross them with him.”

Marks was shocked realizing those eyes were focused on him.

Gubbins grilled Marks. He demanded to know who had seen his report. Who had typed it. Marks had.

Gubbins' eyes glared cold steel at Marks. 'What did you tell Colonel Tiltman about the Dutch situation?' he demanded.

'Nothing, sir, I was instructed not to discuss the country sections.'

'And you always obey your instructions?'

'No, sir. But in this instance, I did.'

There was silence as Celt met Jew on the frontier of instinct. We then went our separate ways.”

Marks memorandum was accepted and implemented.

When the war ended, General Dwight Eisenhower, said that S.O.E. had shortened the war by three months, saving countless lives.

Marks had saved scores of lives. Yet, he could not save everyone.

One life that was lost haunted him for the rest of his days. It also made him famous, not for his wartime work, but because of a love poem he had written in December 1943.

Leo was supposedly in love with a girl named Ruth. She was killed in a Canadian airplane crash. Her death devastated him. He would never let go of his love for her over the years.

In her memory and in memory of the eternal love he had for Ruth, he wrote a short, beautifully moving poem, “The life that I have.”

The life that I have
Is all that I have

**And the life that I have
Is yours.**

**The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours.**

**A sleep I shall have
A rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause.**

**For the peace of my years
In the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours.**

Had he written it for Ruth?

There was a vivacious young woman trained by S.O.E. as a spy. Marks, and every young man at S.O.E., were smitten by her. Her name was Violette Szabo.

Before she left on her last mission, Marks gave Violette his private, deeply personal poem of love that he said he had written for Ruth. She was to use it as her secret cipher, her secret code when transmitting on her spy mission back to London.

Violette was very successful at first. But, she too was eventually discovered.

Two months before the war ended, Violette, along with two other British female spies, Denise Bloch and Lilian Rolfe, were taken to Ravensbruck Women's Concentration Camp outside of Berlin. Denise Block was a French Jewish girl. They were each executed in Ravensbruck with a bullet to the back of the head.

Violette was 23 years old.

Marks always became teary-eyed when his poem was read and Szabo's name was mentioned.

The Life that I have immortalized Marks far more so than the many TV and movie scripts he would write in later life.

Chelsea Clinton, the daughter of former President of the United States Bill Clinton and Senator Hillary Clinton, married Marc Mezvinsky on July 31, 2010, at Astor Courts in Rhinebeck, N.Y. It was a big wedding with 400 guests, family, and friends.

A poem was read at the wedding, a poem of eternal, complete and forever love. It was Leo Mark's poem, *The Life that I have*.

Leo's life took a downward spiral as he approached his 80th year. His marriage to Elena Gausen disintegrated. His personal finances failed. He died of cancer at home, in January 2001.

August 2022, The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, U.K. Branch placed a historical interpretive marker in London in Leo Mark's memory.

The text reads:

Leopold (Leo) Samuel Marks, MBE lived flat 410 Park West, when Chief of Codes at Special Operations Executive (SOE) in WW2. He was a key trainer of secret agents sent to defeat the Nazis.

Set a watch before my mouth Lord:
and over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141:3)

שיתה יהוה שמרה לפי נצרה על דל שפתי

Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation - U.K. Branch,

AJEX UK.

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