

Bearing Witness: The Story of John & Irena Wiley



*U.S. Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary John C. Wiley
(Photo Courtesy of the Library of Congress)*

In 1936, *Time* magazine described John Cooper Wiley as an "able career man renowned for his grave wit." In his memoirs *Witness to History* (1973), Charles E. Bohlen painted a similar portrait of Wiley: "He was a tall, impressive man with a deep voice and a good sense of humor. He was a pragmatic diplomat with an extensive knowledge of the policies and attitudes of the European countries." Born in Bordeaux in 1893 where his father served as the U.S. Consul, Wiley studied at Union College and at Georgetown University Law School. Drawn back to France, he joined the staff of the U.S. Embassy in Paris as a clerk right after the start of the Great War in 1915. Promotions and new assignments would follow taking him to Holland, Chile,

Argentina, Venezuela, Denmark, Peru, as well twice each to Spain, Germany, and Poland. An old fashioned diplomat who was completely at home in the traditional language of diplomacy (French), Wiley married fellow Francophile Irena Baruch in Toulon, France in April 1934. At the time, Wiley had just started working as the Counselor at the new U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

Riding the Bullitt Train to Moscow

While serving as the technical advisor of the U.S. delegation to the World Economic Forum in London in February 1933, Wiley became fast friends with another fellow Francophile named William C. Bullitt (b. 1891), an expatriate journalist who was a close friend of the newly elected U.S. President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When Roosevelt chose Bullitt to be the first U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union in November 1933, Bullitt recruited Wiley to be his number two man in Moscow ignoring the old adage: "never hire your friends." As it turned out, Bullitt and Wiley's work styles were exact opposites. For a while, they worked well together as a team as Bohlen observed: "Wiley's steadiness was a good offset to Bullitt's exuberance and tendency to go to extremes." Unfortunately, Bohlen pointed out that "neither Bullitt nor Wiley was particularly gifted" as an administrator. That task would eventually fall on Bohlen's direct boss, Loy W. Henderson (b. 1892), after his promotion to the position of the Embassy's First Secretary.

In their biography of Bullitt *So Close to Greatness* (1973), Will Brownell and Richard N. Billings describe the often tempestuous relationship between the two men as they tried to work together in Moscow. Bullitt wrote a friend in Washington: "Wiley has a most unusual character. He has much political wisdom and an intimate knowledge of European affairs. Moreover, he can be counted upon during my absence to make no mistake of any kind On the other hand, he is the most selfish man with whom I have ever worked and considers life purely from the point of view of his own ego." Bullitt would later write: "In a word, Wiley has great talents and great defects." The populist Bullitt considered Wiley to be a snob. But the one "great defect" that seems to have annoyed Bullitt more than anything else was Wiley's marriage to the Polish-born Irena Baruch.

Bullitt and Wiley's disagreement built to such a point that it became the subject of a December 14, 1936 expose in Time magazine which traced the origins of Acting Secretary of State R. Walton Moore's announcement of a new Presidential executive order designed to discourage U.S. Foreign Service officers from marrying foreign wives back to the Bullitt-Wiley rift. By the time the Time magazine article appeared, both Bullitt and Wiley had already left Moscow – Bullitt became the new U.S. Ambassador to France while Wiley became the new U.S. Consul General in Antwerp.

How Wiley Came to be the Minister to Latvia and Estonia

Not long after Bullitt and Wiley stopped working together in Moscow, they went back to being friends. In July 1937, Bullitt's recommendation was instrumental in getting Wiley appointed as the new Counselor and Consul General in Vienna. As a result, the Wileys would end up in Austria in time to witness the Nazi occupation (the so-called *Anschluss*) which began in March 1938. Wiley and his staff worked hard to save as many people as they could from the Nazi reign of terror. Perhaps his most notable success was getting Sigmund Freud out of Vienna in June 1938. As it happened, Bullitt and Freud were old friends – they had even co-written a book on President Wilson. Because of this, Bullitt asked Wiley to help get Freud out of the country before it was too late. Wiley even enlisted the help of his wife in the process: Irena stood witness as the Nazis ransacked Freud's apartment. Before it was too late, the Wileys put Freud on a train to Paris. Bullitt met Freud at the Paris train station and saw him safely on to London. After working together to free Freud, Bullitt and Wiley were a team once again. But by then, there was nothing left for Wiley to do in Austria – it was soon absorbed into the Third Reich.

Bullitt then helped Wiley secure his next assignment as the Minister to Latvia and Estonia – a promotion to Chief of Mission for his outstanding work in Austria. Bullitt even called up his friend President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the phone in support of Wiley's nomination after someone tried to block it. Bullitt followed up his telephone call with personal letters lobbying the President, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles. On July 18, 1938, Wiley's appointment finally came through. Wiley would present his credentials first in Riga (October 6, 1938) and then in Tallinn (November 24, 1938).

Witness to the Annexation

Within State Department circles, Wiley was known for his astute political reporting. Loy W. Henderson, first as the Assistant Chief and then as the Acting Chief of the State Department's Eastern European Affairs Division, thanked Wiley several times for his outstanding reporting on the rapidly changing situation in the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia. By the time the Soviets forced the three Baltic nations to accept military bases on their soil in October 1939, Wiley's cables were being read widely throughout the State Department. As the situation in Europe worsened with the start of the Second World War, Wiley reporting gained even more readers. When Soviet troops marched into Latvia and Estonia on June 17, 1940, Wiley had everyone's attention: he had become the official U.S. witness to the Soviet Union's illegal annexation of Estonia and Latvia.

Wiley was in regular contact with Washington during the month he spent observing the unfolding Soviet annexation. The text that follows is just one example with particular relevance for Estonia. Wiley begins his coded June 19 telegram (declassified in 1979) with the words: "The source of the following is confidential but excellent:"

"The Soviet forces entered Estonia in much more warlike formation than in Lithuania or Latvia giving the impression that they expected, perhaps even desired, trouble. It is clear that Soviet policy attaches very special importance to Estonia. This is emphasized by the fact that Maris Coudert commanding the Leningrad area met General [Johnan] Laidoner at Narva two days ago and is now in Tallinn and that [Andrei] Zhdanov also arrived there today. He is now in conference with President Pats. The latter is proposing that a new government be formed under the premiership of [August] Rei, Estonian Minister in Moscow."

"The fact that Zhdanov was selected to come to Estonia has been interpreted in Tallinn as an extremely bad sign. In all the Baltic negotiations in Moscow last September, Zhdanov was the most difficult of all the leaders and is regarded as the principal Soviet 'fire eater.' However, on his arrival in Tallinn he appeared to be in very good humor and the Estonian government is beginning to hope that the Soviet attitude of the last two days which has been extremely exacting may now be moderating."

"My informant, however, is not sanguine and foresees the possibility that after the setting up of new governments in the Baltic states, the Soviet Union will insist on plebiscites which if held under Soviet bayonets might readily be perverted into a legalistical incorporation of these [states] sooner or later into the Soviet Union. He also foresees the possibility that the Soviet Union may insist on the elimination of foreign diplomatic and consular representatives from the Baltic States."

Unfortunately, the grim scenario predicted by Wiley's informant ended up coming true. But thanks to Wiley's regular reporting, the State Department had its own independent source of information about what was really taking place in Estonia and Latvia. Henderson would use Wiley's telegrams to help convince Under Secretary Sumner Welles to issue the U.S. Government's non-recognition statement on July 23, 1940.

On Discovering the Name of Wiley's Confidential Informant

History sometimes resembles a puzzle waiting to be assembled and then re-assembled. As first one connection and then another gets tested, serendipity plays a role. In his telegram to Washington, Minister Wiley never mentions the name of his confidential informant. On the

chance that the Soviets might break U.S. diplomatic codes and would decipher his message, Minister Wiley carefully protected the name of his source. But occasionally, another piece of the puzzle appears seemingly from nowhere. While this new piece may appear to have no connection to the original puzzle at first, once in a while it turns out to be a perfect fit.

In this case, the piece of information missing from Minister Wiley's cable can be found in the memoirs of his wife, *Around the Globe in Twenty Years* (1962). In her chapters on Estonia and Latvia, Irena Wiley describes her last meeting with her close friend, Maria Laidoner. The passage is so filled with emotion that at first it is hard to see what is taking place in the background. While Mrs. Wiley and Mrs. Laidoner are having their last heart-to-heart conversation, Mrs. Wiley mentions – almost as an aside – that "General [Laidoner] took John for a walk to show him more than a thousand young trees he had planted." Several pages earlier at the start of the chapter, Mrs. Wiley begins with the words: "On the night of June 16, 1940." The passage about their last visit to their friends the Laidoners, on the other hand, starts with: "A few days after the Soviet occupation, they [the Laidoners] let us know they wanted to see us." After that it's a matter of simple addition: three plus sixteen equals nineteen and then double-checking the date on Minister Wiley's original telegram to see if it was indeed written on June 19. *Eureka!* Minister Wiley's source for the information in his cable was none other than General Johan Laidoner with whom he had a long talk earlier the same day.

The Corroborating Witness

Like her husband, Mrs. Wiley also stood witness for Latvia and Estonia. Her final chapter devoted to her time in those two Baltic countries continues: "On the night of June 16, 1940, I was suddenly awakened from sleep, the last sound sleep that any of us was to have for the next few months. It was John calling from the Chancery to tell me that Soviet troops had crossed the borders of Latvia and Estonia and were marching on Riga and Tallinn."

Like her husband, Mrs. Wiley was also an astute political observer. She had her own sources of information like her friend Mrs. Laidoner. And, whenever possible, she also went out with her husband to observe the Soviet occupation as it unfolded. At one point in her memoirs, she describes the mock elections that were held to create the Estonian SSR and the Latvian SSR: "A so-called plebiscite followed the occupation. It amounted to no more than a mandatory requirement for everyone to present his passport – every Latvian and Estonian carried a passport – to be stamped by the Communists. John and I went to watch this grim proceeding. No election in history could have been a greater farce. The penalty for not 'voting' was made clear. Without the stamp, the individual would lose his bread card, his job, and face deportation."

Mrs. Wiley also witnessed the first deportations to the Soviet Union: "The long trains with curtained windows left every night for Russia. I had thought that in the unspeakable brutality of the Nazi invasion of Austria I had witnessed the depths of horror, but there was something even more nightmarish, more terrifying in watching, weary and helpless, this silent nightly exodus. The Nazis committed their atrocities night and day; the Soviets, more surreptitious, only under the cover of darkness. The GPU arrested and deported people at random as if they were pulling names out of a hat. Members of the Cabinet, lawyers, government officials, doctors, schoolteachers, workmen, suddenly disappeared, never to be seen again."

Waiting for Gabriel's Trumpet

Right until his forced departure on July 25, 1940, Minister Wiley did his best not only to serve as a witness to the illegal annexation but also to help everyone that he could. As Mrs. Wiley explained, "Fortunately we had marvelous people on our staff. One of them especially, Freddy Reinhardt, who had been with us in Vienna during the *Anschluss*, was an old hand in the grim game of outwitting the invader. His kindness and resourcefulness were inexhaustible. John and Freddy would think up the most bizarre schemes to get people out of the clutches of the Soviets and into safety. Like acrobats, they had to walk a tightrope of American regulations and diplomatic usage."

But there was only so much that the Wileys could do in the short time they had left. The Wileys were eventually forced to return to the U.S. via the Trans-Siberian railroad, across China, and then by ship from Japan to the United States in order to avoid the expanding war in Europe. George Frederick "Freddy" Reinhardt (b. 1911) was transferred to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow along with the other members of the U.S. Legation staffs from both Riga and Tallinn. (Reinhardt would later go on to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, the United Arab States – the short lived union of Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, before finishing his diplomatic career as the U.S. Ambassador to Italy.)

Although Mrs. Wiley would follow her husband around the globe for the next fourteen years until his retirement in 1954, she would continue standing witness for Estonia and Latvia until her death in 1972 (five years after the death of her husband). In 1962, Irena Wiley wrote: "Time has not erased from my mind the poignancy of our leaving the Baltic States. Even today, after so many years, it hurts to remember our uneasiness and remorse abandoning those helpless, desolate people to an implacable fate. It is always hard to break the threads that attach our hearts to the many friends in a post, but one normally has the consolation of hoping to see them again. But when leaving the Latvians and Estonians we knew that to see them again we

would have to wait for Gabriel's last trumpet." While the Wileys did not live to hear it, that trumpet would sound in 1991 on August 20 and 21, signifying an end to the Soviet Union and heralding the return of Estonia and Latvia's independence.