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Migrant, Intern, Doctor — Spy? Dr. Eric Wermuth in Second World War Newfoundland

MALCOLM MACLEOD

“What first put me onto it,” said Sherlock Holmes, “was the strange business of the signal-lights that flashed in the nighttime.” “But Holmes,” said Dr. Watson, “There were no signals that flashed in the night.” “That’s just it,” said Holmes.

THERE ARE THREE sets of problems that can affect people who migrate from one society to another. First are the normal psychic and social dislocations that occur when roots are plucked up in one place and planted elsewhere. A second set of troubles intensifies the first one, if the migrant is a refugee. These problems stem from having to leave the familiar homeland on short notice, under threat, with little planning. The whole situation can be exacerbated by a third set of stubborn, serious difficulties should one arrive in the new society with the cultural identity and official status of “enemy alien” during the course of a nerve-racking war. The life and career of Dr. Eric Wermuth — migrant, refugee, enemy alien in Newfoundland — provides an example of successful adaptation, despite the fact that he was confronted by all three types of hardship.

The context for Wermuth’s interesting, frustrating World War Two experiences is Newfoundland’s perennial difficulty in attracting highly-qualified medical personnel to serve in rural areas. From the mid-1930s, Commission of Government tried to overcome the problem by recruiting staff in Britain and Ireland.¹ In those same years a large number of refugees, especially Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, began flowing out of central Europe. Gerhard Bassler, in his 1992 study *Sanctuary Denied*, and other works, has explained how members of this group were consid-

ered undesirable because of the anti-semitism of Newfoundland policy and officials.² Jews were systematically excluded.

Among other, non-Jewish refugees, however, acceptable immigrants might possibly be found. As an anonymous 1938 letter in the *Daily News* expressed it, refuge should be offered to at least a select few. "It is not often that Newfoundland is able to assist others.... We have the present of freedom ... and we need doctors badly."³

In 1939, just before the start of the war, the Department of Health sent its annual recruiter on a tour of medical facilities in Britain. Contracts were signed with a half-dozen doctors and nurses — uprooted but well-qualified people who had fled from various kinds of danger and unpleasantness in central European homelands. Wermuth was one of the half-dozen. Small as it was, this was the largest group of refugees to which the generally inhospitable Newfoundland state permitted entry in that decade of increasing desperation.⁴ Despite the fact they were deliberately targetted and invited by the Newfoundland government itself, once landed in their new country the new-comers were unfortunately subjected to various forms of casual, and official, suspicion, harassment and investigation.

Eric Wermuth was of Polish/German parenthood and Austrian nationality, an ethnic Pole by first language, born in Krakow in 1914. He grew up chiefly at Vienna, was educated in German, and graduated in medicine from University of Vienna in 1937, age 23. The following year came the union of Germany and Austria. By July Wermuth was in England. He applied for refugee status, explaining to a hearing board that — as one known to be "not favourably disposed" to the new Nazi regime — he had been held and interrogated for two days before fleeing the country. During the rest of 1938 and 1939 he worked at hospitals in Britain. When Newfoundland's secretary (deputy minister) of health, Dr. Harris Mosdell, came along on a trip recruiting medical personnel, Wermuth's application was accepted. He arrived at St. John's in February 1940.⁵

During 1940-48 Wermuth worked as intern, medical officer of health or physician in private practice at St. John's and several small outport villages — St. Joseph's, Grand Bank, Fogo, Harbour Breton. He married in Newfoundland; soon the Wermuths had a baby boy. At each new place he lived, he encountered fresh suspicions that he must be an enemy spy, hostile misinterpretation of his activities and reports to the police, followed by surveillance, interrogation and warnings. In 1948 the family moved to London, Ontario. He had a successful medical practice there (718 Waterloo Street) for over 30 years, married a second Newfoundland woman after his first wife died,⁶ moved in retirement to British Columbia about 1980, and died in the summer of 1986.⁷



Eric Wermuth and Madeleine Martin at their wedding in St. John's, winter of 1940-41. (Photo courtesy of Ralph Wermuth, Calistoga, California.)

Wermuth's wartime sojourn in Newfoundland has left behind at the provincial archives in St. Johns two thick files of police reports and other documentation, about three dozen items in all.⁸ Right off the boat in February 1940 he reported his arrival to the official in charge of registering aliens, Detective Sergeant M.P. Mahoney of the Newfoundland Constabulary. He went to work at the General Hospital. By June rumours were flying and harassments multiplying. Wermuth was reported, with another suspicious character, to have left the hospital carrying a gun. He was said to have received a letter that had not been passed by the censor. After the disappearance of some hospital stationery he was forbidden the use of the office.

In the summer of 1940, the fear of European refugees doubling as German spies was palpable and public. The St. John's *Evening Telegram* editorialized 3 July about dangers posed by "The stranger within." "On the staff of the General Hospital are persons whose nationality would scarcely suggest that they were friendly to the cause in which the Empire is fighting."⁹ One of the readers, "Democrat," continued this theme later in the week.

Is it a coincidence that from the outbreak of the war, so many of the interned aliens have required treatment at the General Hospital where are doctors of their own nationality who can converse with them in a language not understood by others in the ward?

Why are aliens so strategically placed throughout the country in positions where they have the best possible opportunity to gain information — and pass it on? ... The people of Newfoundland demand immediate, vigorous and effective action against the Fifth Column menace in this country.¹⁰

Wermuth complained to Mosdell about all the unfounded aspersions. Partly because of the prejudice being encountered, Mosdell considered transferring him immediately to a rural district, but checked first to see if that might cause a problem for the security of defence installations. Defence officials said they would want to interview Wermuth first.¹¹ As things turned out, it was not until the end of 1940 that Wermuth received his first outpost posting.

In the meantime, his mail was strictly censored and he was under steady surveillance with weekly reports being filed. Through the fall of 1940, Detective Constable Kelly reported such subversive details as that Wermuth had begun keeping company with Miss Madeleine Martin, was seen driving a car his girlfriend rented, gave ten dollars to the Spitfire fund, visited Rabbi Max Katz, did not converse with an interned German seaman who spent several days at the hospital, and bought a car of his own (license 4232). He "...has in no way caused any suspicion by speech or actions."¹² His application to become a naturalized British subject, however, was deferred for consideration until the end of the war (just in case, one suspects, his marriage and acceptance into a normal Newfoundland family was nothing other than the complete spy's most perfect cover).

When Wermuth was assigned to St. Mary's Bay, the Chief of Police reminded local officials they needed to make regular reports on his doings. At Grand Bank, in

the fall of 1942, the spy scare surrounding Wermuth was revived when some local people reported that he often carried a large pack, and would park for lengthy periods on the side of the road outside town. Later that winter, the Department of Health planned on transferring him to Fogo. But Fogo was close to secret radar installations, large oil storage facilities and access to Gander airport; the intelligence officers of all armed services were therefore confidentially informed of this intention. The general commanding United States forces in Newfoundland raised a query whether Dr. Wermuth could really be trusted in that sensitive area. "It must be remembered that wherever he is stationed his nationality will come against him," wrote Sergeant Mahoney. "I am not in a position to say that he is beyond suspicion, but if I may repeat, no evidence is on file against him."¹³

Actually, amid this welter of misunderstandings and false accusations, Wermuth had broken the regulations twice. One misdemeanour occurred in the summer of 1942, when he disappeared from St. Joseph's for two whole weeks, causing Sergeant Mahoney to have to travel down there and check up on him. The policeman was annoyed to find Wermuth nonchalantly strolling the streets of Placentia. Just back from a trip to Canada (North Sydney) where he had purchased a new car, he was now going fishing. "I called his attention to the fact that he is obliged to report from time to time, and that I did not intend to lose any more time investigating his whereabouts." Any further complaint, Mahoney told the physician, could result in an order under the defence regulations, restricting his movements.¹⁴

Wermuth's other proven deviation from regulations had come to light a few weeks earlier, when letters he addressed to Mexico, Switzerland and England were intercepted.¹⁵ Using various friends and contacts, he had been trying to get money or food parcels sent to his mother at her address in Warsaw, enemy-occupied Poland. He was told to comply strictly in future with proper channels and foreign exchange controls.

Of all the needless precautions with regard to this innocent refugee physician, the most interesting, protracted and futile had to do with secret nighttime signals that were flashing — or as it turned out, not flashing — around east end St. John's in the spring of 1940. The first alarm came from Dr. A. C. Tait at the General Hospital. He informed the police that

nurses doing Night Duty ... saw a signal made with a flashlight from one of the windows at the Newfoundland Hotel, sometime within the past week or so, and saw it answered from the Internment Camp where the German prisoners are interned at Quidi Vidi Lake.¹⁶

Wermuth was temporarily living at that hotel! The police sprang into action, Sergeant Mahoney and a partner forming a two-man investigative team. They took statements from sixteen witnesses who implicated Wermuth and another refugee physician, Lisbeth Redlich,¹⁷ in various suspicions and rumours. Their fascinating, thick report, dated 20 June 1940, is worth quoting at length because of the flavour

of 1940s Newfoundland which it gives, and the common-sensical way in which spy hysteria was expressed.

I enclose for your information, file of papers covering an investigation made by Detective Murphy and I with regard to the activities of the two Doctors referred to above, who have been generally regarded with suspicion.... The principal matters referred to in the attached report and to which I draw particular attention, are:—

1. Signals observed at the General Hospital as coming from the Nfld. Hotel and other places.
2. Disappearance of Official Envelopes at the General Hospital which were later presumably used for personal use.
3. Marked courtesy extended to German Interned Prisoners while patients at the Hospital, including payment of Cigarette Bills....

During the past five weeks an investigation respecting the activities and general conduct of Drs. Redlich and Wermuth, Austrian refugees, presently attached to the General Hospital Staff as Interns, has been discreetly carried out ... The investigation was primarily begun because of reports received to the effect that signals were being seen coming from the rear of the Nfld. Hotel by persons at the General Hospital.

In accordance with ... instructions, a member of the staff took up duty at 10.30 P.M. to 2.30 and 3 A.M. at the rear of the Nfld. Hotel from May 5th to June 3rd inclusive.

Assigning a whole policeman to this task, for 4 or 5 hours a night over four full weeks, is a stark sign, almost pitiable, certainly energetic, of how very seriously authorities took intimations of espionage in the spring of 1940. The results, however, were not nearly as exciting as the suspicions had been beforehand.

During this period nothing of a suspicious nature was observed but, in the meantime, reports had been received respecting other signals seen by different people during the night time. In each case investigation was made the result of which showed that no significance could be attached to these reports. In so far as the light seen operating from the rear of the Nfld. Hotel is concerned, it will be observed that several persons in their statements ... are quite definite that it was a light coming from one of the windows at the rear of the Hotel and that the light was apparently operating systematically. In my opinion, the same condition exists in the swinging to and fro motion of a street light, particularly when there is any wind blowing.... Our investigation disclosed ... that the street lights when viewed from certain angles and from a distance have the effect of signals which resemble, to some extent, the systematic transmission of code.¹⁸

In 1940s Newfoundland, Eric Wermuth fell into a spy scare induced by wartime anxiety and hysteria. The very week of his arrival, one of the St. John's theatres was advertising the Hollywood film *Espionage Agent*.¹⁹ Spy talk was in the air. Blackouts and air raid practices magnified rumours of unidentified ships and airplanes,²⁰ and the fear of strangers. While the *Daily News* was less alarmist, in mid-1940 the influential *Evening Telegram* launched an editorial campaign calling

on the public and the government to be more vigilant against possible spies. People of central European origin were especially suspect. It would be a sensible ploy for the enemy to infiltrate some of its agents among those innocently seeking re-location — like the doctors and nurses who had been recruited to Newfoundland. “Gestapo mingles with refugees,” said one headline.²¹

The spy scare circulated around Newfoundland, spiking up into scandal wherever there were individuals who stood out from the community by reason of recent arrival, unusual behaviour or odd accent or nationality. On Bell Island, a good deal of gossip was generated about three families of European descent, especially the one with a member who used a cigarette holder, leather leggings, and a motorcycle with a sidecar. Sergeant Mahoney, who kept such a close eye on Wermuth, sent two constables and an army wireless expert to gather evidence on the secret messages these German sympathesizers were no doubt sending with their clandestine radio sets. After spending two weeks in a parked vehicle with their surveillance equipment, but intercepting nothing, the police obtained warrants and searched the three homes.²² At Gander a civilian construction worker was rumoured to have been caught talking with submarines from the radio room at the air base, and sent to internment camp as a suspected spy.²³ In the Salmonier area fifty years later people still remembered the “German spy,” Maurice Metal, who had a crew of men working in the woods when he was deported by the government for untrustworthiness in 1940.²⁴

The question naturally arises: were there in fact any proven cases of enemy espionage in Newfoundland during the Second World War? The answer is, just one. In October 1943 the submarine U-537 succeeded in putting ashore, far north on the Labrador coast, an automatic weather reporting station.²⁵ It broadcast meteorological information to German naval intelligence until its nickel-cadmium batteries ran down, and was not discovered until thirty-six years after the war ended. In one other incident — the 1942 fire at the Knights of Columbus hostel which took ninety-nine lives, mostly military personnel — the possibility of sabotage by an enemy agent was not ruled out. Judge Brian Dunfield’s inquiry into the disaster offered the opinion that the fire had been started deliberately: “... of incendiary origin ... though the guilty person is not known and the motive is doubtful.”²⁶

On other occasions when espionage was most fervently suspected, however, there was none. When the rail ferry *Caribou* was torpedoed in 1942, U-69 which sank her had no advance knowledge of her sailings, was not even aware of the six-trips-per-week schedule.²⁷ When U-boats attacked iron ore carriers at Bell Island, German records do not show that the attackers had any communication with agents on shore.²⁸ One of the most widespread wartime rumours focussed on the fear of enemy agents being quietly landed on some deserted beach, to blow something up or gather information. There, indeed, were two such landings, but they were in Quebec and New Brunswick, and the agents did not come to Newfoundland.²⁹

"Loose lips sink ships" was a wartime poster one seemed to see everywhere. It reminded people never to mention in public what they might know about schedules and sailings. Enemy ears could be in the restaurant's next booth. A Canadian sailor whose ship operated from St. John's remembered the Newfoundland city at that time as "grimly exciting." The idea that U-boats were lurking closeby, just outside the harbour entrance, heightened the atmosphere of menace. At dances in the recreation huts, "the floor shook as the sailors made a night of it. Were the Germans watching from out there in the cold and dark?"³⁰

The answer seems surely to be: No, they were not. There has now been over fifty years of post-war research in friendly and enemy sources. The results strongly suggest that except for the German weather station in Labrador, all other suspicions of Axis spy-activity in wartime Newfoundland were without foundation, and persons accused or suspected were even more innocent of wrong-doing than was Eric Wermuth, when he tried to send support to his mother.

On first encountering the story of Dr. Wermuth, one might feel a twinge of smug self-righteousness. How could people back then, we wonder, have been so foolishly gullible and panicked? We are tempted to think we would have been wiser. This temptation must be resisted. Given the sovereign, continuing weaknesses of human nature, it would be unhistorical to think that one would have acted very differently from the people in the actual situation.

The practical lesson to be learned from Wermuth's experiences applies to the present, not the past. Every age has its own fad crimes which seem to make people particularly excitable, unreasonable, or paranoid. Espionage was the fad fear in wartime Newfoundland; in the 1990s it is allegations about sexual abuse of children and women. Wermuth's experiences should make us less quick in jumping to condemnation, confronting issues to which our own society is particularly sensitive.

While the Wermuth affair shows some sectors of Newfoundland society as regrettably alarmist and gossipy, the state bureaucracy is revealed as quite sophisticated, effective and fair. When necessary, medical personnel were recruited overseas. Officials preferred information to gossip. Wermuth's superiors never believed he was a spy on no evidence. Even before Newfoundland's creation of a defence security establishment in 1942,³¹ the police force was large and flexible enough to contain a specialized section for dealing with enemy aliens. It commanded sufficient resources to mount investigations, and the good sense and integrity — once the panic of 1940 had passed — to say so bluntly when hysterical, unlikely rumours were found to have no substance. "I am not in a position to say that he is beyond suspicion," wrote spy-hunter Mahoney in 1943, "but if I may repeat, no evidence is on file against him."

It was perhaps the competent if adversarial relationship he had with the police that helped Wermuth endure patiently the persecution of unjust suspicions, triggered by nothing more threatening than the fact that he spoke English with a

German-influenced accent. According to his widow and his son, Wermuth's memories of living in Newfoundland were not darkened by resentment at being sometimes treated as if he were a hostile spy. Instead, he would recall professional challenges, the many immunizations and maternity cases he handled, difficulties he had in getting his Viennese medical qualifications fully recognized,³² important friendships formed, his new family and above all, great hunting and fishing.³³

In this connection, though, he would sometimes add how easy it was to have the services of a good guide when going fishing. He was thinking of times when the Ranger at Harbour Breton was reluctant to permit Wermuth to be out of observation by the community for several hours at a time — and up to who knows what mischief. Choosing the most amiable course of action, also the path of least resistance, the Ranger would just accompany the spy suspect on those expeditions.³⁴

Notes

¹Patricia O'Brien, "Medicine," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, III (St. John's: Cuff, 1991), 499.

²Gerhard Bassler, *Sanctuary denied: refugees from the Third Reich and Newfoundland's immigration policy 1906-1949* (St. John's: Institute for Social & Economic Research, 1992). See also his "'Deemed undesirable': Newfoundland's immigration policy 1900-1949," in J.Hiller and P. Neary, eds., *Twentieth century Newfoundland: explorations* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1993), 153-172.

³Quoted in Gerhard Bassler, "Newfoundland and refugees from the Third Reich 1933-1941," *Newfoundland Studies* (Spring 1987), 59.

⁴Bassler, *Sanctuary Denied*, 197-206.

⁵Eric Wermuth, 3-page statement incorporated in report M.P.Mahoney to Chief of Police 16 October 1940, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), GN 13/1/B, box 353-2, file "Wermuth." Unless otherwise noted, all references to documents of the 1940s are from this source.

⁶His first wife, Madeleine Martin of St. John's, died in 1977. His second wife, also a native of St. John's, was Evelyn Ash, who became Mrs. Kevin Rossiter, and after her first husband died married Wermuth in 1979. Telephone interview with Mrs. Evelyn Wermuth, London, Ontario, 16 May 1997.

⁷Telephone interview with Mrs. Evelyn Wermuth, 16 May 1997. Ralph Wermuth to M. MacLeod 25 May 1997.

⁸PANL, GN 13/1/B box 353-2, file "Wermuth"; and GN 13/2/A box 193, file 71. For the most part the two files contain the same documents.

⁹*Evening Telegram*, 3 July 1940, 6.

¹⁰*Evening Telegram*, 5 July 1940, 13.

¹¹Secretary for Justice and Defence to Secretary for Health, 21 June 1940.

¹²Reports of Detective Constable Geoffrey Kelly 10 and 26 September, 7 October and 7 November 1940.

¹³Mahoney to Chief of Police, attached to Commissioner for Justice and Defence to General John Brooks, Commanding Officer U.S. Forces in Newfoundland, 23 February 1943. "It does not seem to me his movements should be restricted unless a general order is made debarring aliens from specified places."

¹⁴Mahoney to Chief of Police, 16 July 1942.

¹⁵Assistant Censor A. Bellamy to Chief of Police, 17 April 1942.

¹⁶Sergeant G. Trickett to Chief of Police, 8 June 1940.

¹⁷Another Austrian refugee, born about 1910, who like Wermuth was under intense suspicion at this most perilous and edgy stage of the war. She was said to have made statements praising the German leader Adolf Hitler, and to have bought cigarettes for German internees when they were patients at the hospital. "I have seen her dressed in slacks in the daytime She told Mrs. Chatfield that she was obliged to write her letters in German because her relatives could not read English She keeps her room door locked whenever she leaves it, and she does a lot of typing I have no definite information that this woman is doing anything that may be detrimental to Public Safety. One hears a lot of rumours, ..." Statement of Doris Moore, assistant dietician, 5 June 1940. Besides Wermuth and Redlich, there were another half-dozen refugee medical personnel on whom Newfoundland police kept files. The pattern of difficulties they faced is discussed in Bassler, *Sanctuary Denied*, 197-209.

¹⁸Mahoney to Chief of Police, incorporating a detailed report from Detective Constable Frank Murphy, 20 June 1940. Despite the fact that the rumour about light signals proved unfounded, Mahoney nevertheless concluded, "The investigation has not brought proof whereby I could actually make direct accusations, but under the circumstances I am doubtful about [Wermuth and Redlich]. I submit these Doctors should be asked to explain certain allegations"

¹⁹Starring Joel McCrae and Brenda Marshall. *Evening Telegram*, 26 February 1940, 3.

²⁰Helen Porter, *Below the Bridge* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1979), 72.

²¹Editorial of 29 August 1940, cited in Bassler, *Sanctuary Denied*, 185.

²²Steve Neary, *The enemy on our doorstep* (St. John's: Jespersen, 1994), 74-5.

²³John Cardoulis, *A friendly invasion, II* (St. John's: Creative, 1993), 99.

²⁴Bassler, *Sanctuary Denied*, 192-7.

²⁵Michael Hadley, *U-boats against Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 163-5.

²⁶*Report on the destruction by fire of the Knights of Columbus hostel* (St. John's: Robinson, 1943), 21-2.

²⁷Malcolm MacLeod, "Death by choice or by chance: U-69 and the first Newfoundland ferry *Caribou*," *Newfoundland Studies* (Spring & Fall 1996), 1-15.

²⁸Hadley, *U-boats*, 116, 130, 152. Neary, *The enemy*, 15-18, 54-62. Soon after U-518's attack at Bell Island, Canadian naval authorities had the opportunity to interrogate a member of the submarine's crew. No reference was "made to any intelligence received from Newfoundland — the frequent suspicious lights reports claimed to be observed in conjunction with the Wabana incidents get no support." Neary, *The enemy*, 98.

²⁹Hadley, *U-boats*, 147-58.

³⁰William H. Pugsley, *Saints, devils and ordinary seamen* (Toronto: Collins, 1945), 32-3.

³¹A 7-person section, all imported from Britain. See Malcolm MacLeod, *Peace of the continent* (St. Johns: Cuff, 1986), 24.

³²Finally overcome in 1946, when he became fully licensed. Records of the Newfoundland Medical Board, St. John's, registration no. 528. From 1942 onwards Wermuth often had temporary registration legitimizing his various appointments.

³³Telephone interviews with Mrs. Evelyn Wermuth, London, Ontario, 16 May 1997, and Ralph Wermuth, Calistoga, California, 17 May 1997.

³⁴Ralph Wermuth to M. MacLeod 25 May 1997.