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# The Seven Files on Komesaroff Family Members

As Australia's counter-intelligence services evolved and earlier agencies were replaced by newer ones, files were culled and documents regarded as no longer relevant were destroyed. For example, when ASIO relocated its head office from Sydney to Melbourne in 1950, there was an extensive rationalisation of records, and files dating back to the early 1920s were destroyed. I am of the firm view that such destruction was not a deliberate policy for disposing of 'incriminating evidence', but was, rather, a practical policy for minimising the cost of file relocation and storage. Also, as people died, their files were destroyed; files that were not destroyed were later transferred to succeeding agencies, and it is through this process that ASIO holds some documents that predate its creation. Apart from culling obsolete records, it would appear that on its creation ASIO did not inherit all the files from its predecessor organisations, as some of them were 'lost' or 'misplaced'.<sup>1</sup> The first Hope Royal Commission describes the time when ASIO took over from the Commonwealth

Investigation Service (CIS) as 'a bitter period'. CIS people regarded the contacts they developed as 'personal assets', whose details they assumed they could take with them, along with their own 'personal files', on leaving the organisation. The Commission's report mentions that at least one CIS investigator retained his 'personal files' and did not transfer them to ASIO.<sup>2</sup> The hostility between the CIS and ASIO continued into the 1960s when the former body was absorbed into the Commonwealth Police. The antagonism between the CIS and ASIO may explain why the dossiers relating to members of the Komesaroff clan appear to be incomplete.

In his official history of ASIO, John Blaxland reports that the organisation's records management had serious deficiencies, lacking adequate systems for storage and retrieval and for controlling access to information. 'File documents often lacked details including numbers, descriptions, dates and signatures. Such oversights made control and audit of records all the more difficult.'<sup>3</sup> The premature and unauthorised shredding of nineteen files relating to Gerontiy Pavlovich Lazovik, the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) resident (1974 to 1977) and First Secretary at the Soviet Embassy in Canberra, is a perfect example of the consequences of ASIO's dysfunctional filing system. In 1980, ASIO received information that Lazovik had been awarded a medal for an intelligence recruitment while he was stationed in Australia. Hoping to identify the Australian traitor, ASIO called up their files on Lazovik but were horrified to learn

that the documents had been destroyed.

In my examination of well over 200 files that ASIO has released, I have found that the files share two common characteristics. Firstly, most files were opened in response to a perceived specific threat, but when the threat was found to be no longer credible, the file was not closed and information continued to be collected, creating an ever-expanding file. Such information collection has made many files voluminous, although they seem to contain little information of national security value.

The second characteristic of ASIO's files that I noted was that they expanded beyond the scope of their initial target. An example of this is a file on Zionist youth organisations that was created as a result of an intercepted letter from a communist, Frances Bernie, to the Secretary of the Cambridge University Labour Federation. In the letter Bernie claimed that the communist youth group, the Eureka Youth League, had established a branch known as Shomrim Zionist Youth. Bernie, who had been raised a Catholic, did not understand that communists only represented a small proportion of the Shomrim Zionist movement, but, based on her intercepted letter, ASIO opened a file on the Shomrim and this file ultimately became a large repository for information on all of Australia's Zionist youth groups.<sup>4</sup>

ASIO's dysfunctional filing system came as a surprise, because when the organisation was formed in 1949, it was modeled on MI5, Britain's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency, and several British agents were sent

to Australia to assist their Commonwealth colleagues. The new organisation's record-keeping arrangements were copied directly from MI5's central file registry, and adapted where necessary for local conditions.<sup>5</sup>

In Australia access to archival records is governed by the *Archives Act* 1983. Under the Act, Commonwealth government records are released for access by the public when they reach what is known as the 'open-access period'. Depending on when the document was generated the open-access period ranges from 20 to 30 years after it was created. Through the National Archives of Australia (NAA) I requested files from ASIO of all the 44 first- and second-generation Komesaroff family members in Australia. ASIO was able to confirm that they had files on only seven members of my family, and at my request, these seven dossiers were transferred to the NAA.

The transfer process precludes blanket applications for families or other groups and requires a separate request for each individual or organisation. There were only three instances when I was surprised that ASIO's archivists were not able to locate all the files I sought. The first of these involved Cecilia Nathan (née Komisaruk), who came to Australia in 1912 to marry David Zmood. Cecilia was known to be very active in left-wing politics and during the Great War she is alleged to have encouraged her husband (David Zmood) to flee to America to avoid conscription.<sup>6</sup> A number of family members have claimed she was an ardent member of the CPA, so I had expected to find a file labelled with her name. However,

in 1928 Cecilia's marriage ended in a bitter divorce and she changed her name several times subsequently, which may have made it difficult to locate a file in 2017. It is also possible that the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB), another forerunner of ASIO, had a file on Cecilia and when the CIB's functions were absorbed by ASIO the document was destroyed because it was regarded as no longer relevant.

I had also expected a file on Cecilia's daughter (Tybel, who lived with her mother), but none was located. Several people who knew her told me that Tybel had been a member of the CPA. Unless ASIO staff have conspired to prevent my access to the file, which I do not believe, it is more than likely the file was either misplaced or destroyed when Tybel died in 1973. People familiar with ASIO's records management give credence to the possibility of misplaced or destroyed files and describe a system with 'serious deficiencies, lacking an adequate system for storage and retrieval ...'<sup>7</sup>

I was also disappointed that I could not locate a file relating to myself. In my youth I had been active in student politics, including opposition to conscription and the Vietnam War, and for a period in the 1980s my work required me to travel regularly to the Soviet Union. Also, at different periods in the 1990s, my employment necessitated that I live in communist China and post-communist Russia. It is possible that my opposition to the Vietnam War was less relevant and noteworthy than I had believed, and as for my trips to the Soviet Union,

this information could remain embargoed by the NAA's 30-year open-access period.<sup>8</sup> It is also possible that my unfulfilled expectations reflect my paranoia.

While there is no personal file on me, I do feature in a file that records ASIO intercepts of telephone communications with the Soviet Embassy in Canberra.

The absence of a personal file on me reminds me of a story told by my friend, the late Stephen Murray-Smith, a former communist who resigned from the Party in 1958. In 1982 Stephen applied to the newly elected Cain Labor government in Victoria for a copy of his Special Branch file.<sup>9</sup> Race Mathews, a close friend of Stephen's and the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, reported that the State's Special Branch had claimed not to have a file on the former CPA member. Stephen's response was to ask Mathews not to tell anyone there was no file, as in the circles in which he moved, not to have a file would send a message that could cause him long-term problems. Around the same time, Stephen's friend, the social commentator and another former communist, Phillip Adams, had requested his ASIO file. When told 'you don't have a file', Phillip began to question the organisation's competence.<sup>10</sup>

The seven personal dossiers and the other 60 or so files relating to the Melbourne Jewish community and its association with the local CPA branch that I examined were devoid of gratuitous racist comments that others, who have researched the same historical period, have reported. I never encountered the crude antisemitic rants

that Mark Aarons found littered throughout his family's files.<sup>11</sup> Aarons is not alone in suggesting that ASIO has an antisemitic streak; in his unofficial history of ASIO, Frank Cain claims that in the 1950s, 'ASIO was markedly antisemitic partly reflecting the British campaign against Jewish terrorist fighters in Palestine.'<sup>12</sup> None of the files I examined showed evidence of such discrimination.

The subjects of the seven ASIO files on the Komesaroff family are three first-generation migrants and four of the second generation who were born in Australia. The political beliefs of the seven ranged across the left wing of the political spectrum, from social democrat to one, but possibly two, card-carrying members of the CPA. For the most part, the seven were proud Zionists and avid opponents of antisemitism. Their religious observance spanned the range from non-observant through Liberal or Reform Judaism to traditional or orthodox Jews who maintained kosher homes and attended synagogue regularly. None of the seven held derogatory or self-hating views of Jewish people, nor were any of them apostates who had renounced Judaism. They all married Jewish partners, and with the exception of one who was cremated without any ceremony, they were all buried with acknowledgment and in accordance with their Judaism.<sup>13</sup>

Like their other first- and second-generation family cohorts, the seven were well integrated into Australian society, being members of non-Jewish community organisations as well as Jewish groups. While the three first-generation members of the group spoke Yiddish,

they did not speak it regularly, preferring to communicate in English which they spoke fluently. The four second-generation members of the group did not speak Yiddish, but probably had some understanding of the language.

None of the seven was radical either by temperament or by conviction, and although they worked for social and political change, none of their actions could be considered radical or revolutionary. Generally they were middle-class owners of small businesses who had no affiliation with organisations such as trade unions. Five of the seven had tertiary qualifications, four in science and one in the humanities.

The educational qualifications remind me of a conclusion drawn by a Canadian Royal Commission which, in 1946, examined fourteen Canadian citizens who had betrayed their country to the Soviet Union. The Commission's analysis showed that most of the fourteen, including highly regarded scientists, were of unusually high educational standard.<sup>14</sup> The ASIO files on my seven relatives make it abundantly clear that they were not remotely involved in any treachery or threat to Australia; nonetheless, their preference for science and their high educational attainment are worth noting.

None of the seven is alive today, so I have not been able to discuss their records with them, though in each case I provided copies of the documents to surviving close family members, usually their children or grandchildren. In almost every case, the family member was surprised to learn of the existence of the file, but they

were not necessarily shocked by the contents, though they expressed surprise that a government could spend taxpayer's money on such mundane data collection that did not seem to have any relevance to national security. In his official history of ASIO, David Horner echoes this view when he writes that it is now clear that ASIO's wide-ranging surveillance 'and the gathering of information into voluminous files, was a massive waste of time and resources.'<sup>15</sup>

All the files relating to members of the Komesaroff family are relatively slim, with none exceeding 124 pages – embarrassingly small when compared with the 88 volumes totalling 14,000 pages that ASIO compiled on the CPA's national secretary, Laurie Aarons. Also, with a mere seven files, the Komesaroff family pale into insignificance alongside the four generations of the Aarons dynasty that dominated the CPA and on whom, over five decades, ASIO created more than 209 files containing in excess of 32,000 pages.<sup>16</sup>

Details of the seven Komesaroff personal files are summarised in Table 2, which reports the size of each file, the number of redacted pages and the number of pages that were totally withheld. In Tessa Silberberg's file, as an example, the NAA reported that, for the open-access period, her file contained seven folios, of which three were released without any censorship while four included some form of redaction. For the open-access period, all seven files generated a total of 190 folios, none of which was totally exempt, although 54 contained portions that were blacked out.

**Table 2: Details of the seven Komesaroff family members' ASIO files released by the NAA.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Totally Exempt</b>	<b>Open With Exemption</b>	<b>Open and Transferred to NAA</b>	<b>Total Number of Folios in the Open-access Period</b>
Yaakov Leib Mendelson	0	3	8	11
Myer Nathan	0	3	7	10
Peter Komesaroff	0	6	1	7
Louis Komesaroff	0	20	104	124
Max Komesaroff	0	14	13	27
Tessa Silberberg	0	4	3	7
Morris Komesaroff	0	4	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>190</b>