



***Agent Sonya*, by Ben Macintyre  
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy**

From John Le Carre to Alan Furst, spy novelists have mastered the art of espionage fiction. Ben Macintyre in his new book *Agent Sonya*, however, has written a true-life tale about a spy who was more audacious than any imagined fictional character. And that spy was a woman.

Ursula Kuczynski—a.k.a “Agent Sonya”—was born in 1907 and grew up in an exclusive Berlin suburb, the daughter of a prominent German Jewish couple. Her father, Robert, was Germany’s most distinguished demographic statistician. The Kuczynski family “knew everyone who was anyone in Berlin’s left-wing intellectual circles.” From an early age, Ursula was drawn to communism.

In 1929, Ursula married Rudi Hamburger, an idealistic architect. Amid the world-wide Depression, Rudi secured a position in Shanghai to design governmental buildings. The young couple’s move to Shanghai would have far-reaching consequences for their careers and for their marriage as well.

Shanghai in the 1930s was “simultaneously glamorous and seedy.” At a party one evening, Ursula and Rudi were introduced to Richard Sorge, whom Ian Fleming once described as “the most formidable spy in history.” Sorge, the senior Soviet spy in Shanghai, recruited Ursula into his espionage circle, giving her the code name *Sonya* (“dormouse” in Russian). Ursula began “living a double life: one with Rudi, dutiful and comfortable; the other with Sorge, a thrilling existence of secret meetings.”

As Ursula’s espionage career advanced, she was sent to Japanese-occupied Manchuria and then to Moscow for training. She agreed to leave her toddler son Michael with Rudi’s parents temporarily while she was in Russia, rationalizing that while “her duty, as a mother, was to be with Michael, her other duty was stronger.”

Domestic life gave Ursula the perfect cover for her clandestine spying. After divorcing Rudi, Ursula married Len Burton, a British citizen and fellow Soviet spy. Moving to the English countryside with Michael and her little girl Nina, Ursula continued to spy for the Soviets during the World War II years: "As Mrs. Burton she had a settled home, friendly neighbors; as Agent Sonya she had a camera for producing microdots, a network of subagents, and an illegal radio transmitter in her cupboard."

In her youth, Ursula, a budding communist, had managed to elude the Nazis. During the emerging Cold War, the FBI and British intelligence dismissed warning signs of her covert activities: "Men simply did not believe a housewife baking scones and packing her children off to school could possibly be capable of important espionage. Ursula ruthlessly exploited the natural advantage of her gender." Ben Macintyre's prodigious research for *Agent Sonya* is informed by Ursula's own diaries and interviews with her children. Indeed, the story Macintyre weaves is so fantastical that if *Agent Sonya* were a novel, it would be deemed preposterous.