

Personal Documentation in the Cold War¹

By KEN MUNDEN

Arlington, Va.

THIS discussion will proceed from two assumptions: that we are in fact engaged in a cold war and that the important events in the life of the average man are documented in records which he must keep as his personal documentation if he is to meet the increasing demands of the state and society upon him. Since the maintenance of personal files presents a problem for most of us under normal circumstances, it remains for me to show that there are particular aspects of the problem for our generation of adult citizenry.

Early in his administration President Eisenhower appointed a special assistant "to see that all departments of the Government speak and act as one in fighting the cold war." Although this statement of Mr. Jackson's functions is that of the *Washington Post* reporter and not of the President, it is significant that Mr. Adams, the President's assistant, so far recognized the temperature of the war in which the United States is engaged as to announce that Mr. Jackson would have "special responsibilities in the cold-war planning of this Administration."² It might be profitable to examine this new official concept, which suggests that cold-war planning is different from the ordinary kind of war planning, but I am concerned with it in this paper only because it enables me to assume fairly that the cold war is a fact.

My second assumption — that no one of us can escape his domestic filing duties — is considerably less debatable, for the problems involved in the management of the family archives and the means employed to solve them exactly parallel the problems and solutions found in business or government. Thus, as in the case of any civic bureau, the keeper of the family's papers (however strong his inclination toward central filing) will permit decentralization of papers to the extent that, for example, the card file of favorite

¹ This paper, read at a meeting of the social studies group of the Alexandria (Va.) Branch of the American Association of University Women, Feb. 25, 1953, is printed with slight changes in the text and with the addition of footnotes.

² *Washington Post*, Feb. 17, 1953.

recipes is kept in a kitchen drawer in convenient proximity to the mixing bowls, the index of the phonograph-record collection is on the shelf holding the recordings indexed, the minutes of the meetings of the local women's club (of which one's wife may be the secretary) repose habitually on Mother's desk, and Brother's school diplomas and BSA certificates hang in Brother's room. Secret or confidential files, maintained apart from the family's central files, are recognized as an evil necessity, although some of these (like Sister's series of neatly packaged and labeled letters from her admirers) are regularly scheduled for disposition if never actually destroyed.

The keeper of the family's records learns also to distinguish between the materials that serve to document the family's activities and those that serve the family merely because of their reference value. In the latter category he mentally places the whole of the family library, the extensive collection of road and street maps (although in daily use for one purpose or another), and the boxes of periodicals, prints and drawings, dress patterns, news cuttings, and music scores in attic or closet. Finally, his intellectual control of the whole is such that he can perceive the transitory character of such records as Christmas greetings and receipted utility bills as opposed to the relative permanency of deeds, wills, birth and death certificates, passports, insurance policies, and tax records.

It is with these more permanent types of personal papers that I am concerned chiefly in this discussion, although I think we may include in a definition of personal documentation *any* records *wherever kept* that document the events in the life of a man or woman, his or her private or public activities, his or her transactions, movements, beliefs, or health. Admitting this definition, we may agree that personal documentation, for most people, exists in considerably greater quantity outside the family archives than in them. Thus, the schools, churches, clubs, and other institutions in which a person has or has had membership maintain the records of his participation; the offices or agencies of the municipal, county, State, and Federal governments record his birth, marriage, divorce, political registration, taxation, contractual obligations, real property ownership, crimes, and mental or other incompetence; his attorney, bank, insurance company, and mortgager maintain records of his capital assets and liabilities; and his successive employers keep in their personnel files the record of his occupation or professional standing. To these we may add for some persons, identification data based on fingerprints, such as those maintained by the Federal

Bureau of Investigation; and logically arranged lists of personal names, such as those appearing in telephone directories.

There is, as well, the biographical information that is being collected systematically by almost every government and by many nongovernmental agencies, pertaining not only to the citizens of potential enemy nations but to its own citizens and those of its allies as well. A person employed in any official capacity or who otherwise occupies a sensitive position in business, industry, or the educational and scientific professions takes it for granted nowadays that fully documented investigative files pertinent to himself are being accumulated, maintained, and studied. Furthermore, if he is a person of some consequence, he probably assumes that the intelligence services of potential enemy nations have not overlooked him. This form of intelligence, which Sherman Kent calls "biographical intelligence," seeks to file against a given name a range of data wide enough to answer the "pertinent questions always being asked about people." "What sort of man is he? What are his political and economic views? What are all his names and when was he born? Can he speak English? Who are his intimates? What are his weaknesses? How long is he likely to hold his present standing? Where was he in 1937?" This "perfect biographical note," Mr. Kent observes, "must include a large amount of cold factual information and a large amount of critical appraisal."³

The citizen may not know whether his dossier, reposing in one or more such biographical files, is voluminous or scant; or he may have no reason to suspect that he interests any governmental or political instrumentality for biographical purposes; but he does know that much of the documentation he accumulates in his own portfolio of "important papers" is a reflection of official or public records. In this period of the cold war the citizen who feels apprehensive lest his means of identifying himself disappear, should cold wax hot, is constrained to consider the consequences of the destruction, removal, or sequestration of these official files.

As archivist of the Family Munden I take on this consideration with typical distaste, but because I happen to be the only one of my family of four to have been born in the United States my obligation to keep my vital papers in order is greater, perhaps, than that of most persons. Hence my family's personal documentation includes copies of my wife's certificate of birth from the Stato Civile of Milan; our marriage certificate from the same office; the United States Vice Consul's certificate of witness to our marriage

³ Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton, 1949), pp. 32, 141.

from the American Consulate General at Milan; the birth certificate of my son Robin from the Stato Civile of Rome; the United States Foreign Service's official report of Robin's birth as a "Child Born Abroad of American Parents or Parent" from the American Embassy at Rome; the birth certificate of my younger son Gordon from the État Civil of the Department of the Seine; and, similarly, the Foreign Service's official report of Gordon's birth from the American Embassy at Paris. Included also are the copies of my own birth certificate from the register of deeds of North Carolina's Pasquotank County and the appropriate health records for the four of us. While these constitute the documents most vital to the establishment of our collective identity, they are supplemented by such identifying papers as passports, motor vehicle operators' licenses, credit cards, employment identity cards, insurance policies, my record of military service, my wife's visa, and photographs whenever attached to, or a part of, these papers.

I do not pretend, of course, that these documents are being maintained with an eye toward the cold war, for it is obvious that I could not buy a house, hold a job, drive my automobile, send my children to school, or complete my income-tax returns without recourse to them and to hundreds of other personal or family papers I have to keep accessible. Since the cold war is a reality, however, I cannot but be conscious of the fact that even my most vital documents would be valueless were they not substantiated by the official vital statistics maintained in Milan, Rome, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Paris, Washington, and Elizabeth City and by the official records of my military and civil service kept by the United States Government. And although it is a fact that the records of more than one bureau of vital statistics were destroyed in Europe in World War II or have become unavailable to the public in the period of the cold war, it is equally a fact that the certificates of birth, marriage, and death that have been issued by those unfortunate bureaus have retained their validity. Thus — if I may revert to my role of family archivist — I cannot conceal entirely my satisfaction in the completeness of the documentation I have to maintain; for I cannot know for certain, and no other man can, that the particular records that bear my name in the government bureaus of three nations will survive the era that will follow the period of the cold war. And, assuming their survival, I cannot know how long they may be inaccessible or, for that matter, the analysis to which they may be subjected or the uses to which they may be put.

The prospect of the drying up of the very sources of information

vital to successful personal documentation enhances, then, the normal problems of maintaining adequately the family's records at this time. This objective is further complicated, for the citizen of any country that is potentially a theater of war, by the desirability of eliminating from the household archives those papers the revelation of which would be detrimental to the interests of the family. The citizen or resident of such a country may plan to cause his personal papers to disappear, at the right moment, if he has any reason to fear the divulging of their contents to enemy occupying forces; but he must weigh well the consequences to himself and to his family of becoming one of the inevitable many who will have suffered the loss of, or will have become separated from, their personal documentation. Under circumstances such as those that have prevailed and do prevail in Korea, how many of the wandering homeless will carry birth records, passports, identity cards, or the like in their wallets — or carry wallets for that matter? Yet each man so unfortunate as to be caught in such a situation will necessarily queue up for bread, for work, for medicines, or perhaps merely to be shot; will give his name and the essential facts about himself; and will receive a classification for whatever purpose — documents or no documents. Thus, in the German administration of occupied Eastern Europe in World War II, the German security police, on the basis of oral interviews with persons lacking for the most part personal documentation of any kind, issued various forms of passports or labor cards, the effect of which was calculated to beguile their bearers into a sense of regained identity but which actually served the ulterior motive of grouping human beings for assignment to the notorious concentration camps of German-occupied Eastern Europe.⁴

Whether to step forth boldly with his particular identifying papers or to withhold or distort them is, therefore, a matter to be considered, if not decided, by the civilian resident of every zone of potential danger, with due regard to the known policies and practices of the occupying power. If he should become an internee of the invading forces, because of his displacement or for any other reason, he may be encouraged by the knowledge that, under the 1949 Geneva conventions for the protection of war victims, his family or identity documents may not be taken away without a receipt being given (!) and that the occupying power must take all necessary steps to facilitate the identification of children and the

⁴ International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945—1 October 1946* (Nuremberg, 1947-49), vols. 25-34, *passim*.

registration of their parentage.⁵ The importance to the internee of the accessibility of his personal documentation is implicit in certain other provisions of these conventions, among which may be mentioned the prohibition against the occupying power's hindering "the application of any preferential measures in regard to food, medical care . . . in favor of children under fifteen years, expectant mothers, and mothers of children under seven years." The burden of proof of the ages of his children would fall indubitably upon the internee himself. And even Communists, as Whittaker Chambers observes, "have a respect, amounting to awe, for the signed document. . . . For in breaking the continuity of tradition, the revolutionist, for his own sake, must seek a cementing substitute. All he has left to fall back on, the work of his blighting touch upon life's tissues, are those dead papers, interminable procedures, formidable quiddities — and his incongruous regard for them."⁶

But the withholding of vital personal documentation would become a definite possibility, and unavoidably so, if any future occupying power should impose measures against particular religious, racial, national, or other groups. For example, the temptation must have been irresistible to disobey the decree of the German military administration in France, September 27, 1940, which required the residents of the Jewish religious communities to submit to the French authorities any evidentiary documents that might prove them to be Jews.⁷ As for the alteration or falsification of documents for the purpose of evading occupational measures or securing preferential treatment from occupying forces, it suffices merely to allude to the well-known practice of many United Nations-protected displaced persons, in perfect health, who passed off the X-ray film of consumptives as their own.

Still another problem for the conscientious custodian of his family's records under foreign occupation is inherent in the extreme vulnerability of public (and therefore more accessible) records, for even the obliteration from the public records of identifying personal names is not an impossibility. Thus, it may be recalled that in 1941 the nationals of Luxembourg who had "foreign" (*i. e.*, non-German) first names were required to assume the corresponding German first names or, if that was impossible, to select other German first names. I am not here so much concerned with

⁵ "Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of August 12, 1949," articles 50, 97.

⁶ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York, 1952), p. 233.

⁷ The decree is quoted in Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), p. 399.

the genocidal character of this legislation as with the fact that it had the effect of altering vital records, for such changes were to be noted in the official register of births and families.⁸ This suggests certain other complications in the matter of personal documentation in this particular period, when a good deal of Europe is in a state of virtual occupation; for the extent to which the non-Communist world can give credence to records that even temporarily are administered by Soviet instrumentalities is a moot question. It suggests also the vulnerability of public records — even American public records — to misuse for fraudulent purposes inimical to personal interests. For example, the procurement of fraudulent birth certificates has presented no particular problem to Communists anywhere in the world, and certainly not to the American Communist Party, if we may accept again the evidence of “Witness” Chambers. One means used by the ingenious J. Peters, as described in *Witness*, was almost transparently simple: two research teams were set to work on vital statistics in the New York Public Library, one studying birth records, the other records of infantile death.

The results were compared, and when it was discovered that a baby had died shortly after birth . . . Peters’ underground apparatus [in the name of the dead child] would . . . write to the Board of Health (enclosing the regular fee) and request a photostat of a birth certificate. . . . As a matter of routine, the Board of Health would promptly issue a birth certificate, perfectly in order except that the person it certified had been dead for three or four decades. Using this fraudulent birth certificate, a Communist could . . . apply for an American passport, which, also as a matter of routine, was promptly issued, for there was almost no way to detect the fraud.⁹

A final consideration — that of the problem of duplicating vital personal documentation against the possibility of loss or destruction — is worth at least a footnote. If the governments and other institutions of this world, in this period of the cold war, are to provide themselves with duplications of their important records, it follows that the prudent family archivist, if he is convinced of the possibility of the destruction or loss of his records, must take similar precautions. If he is a serious keeper of records and cannot conceive of the possibility of resuming his normal pursuits should his files be lost irretrievably, he may well consider the advantage of microfilming the lot; but at least the most vital family documentation could be microfilmed on strips of a few centimeters, to be

⁸ Order of the Chief of the Civil Administration in Luxembourg, Jan. 31, 1941, quoted in Lemkin, *Axis Rule*, p. 441.

⁹ Chambers, *Witness*, p. 355.

tucked inconspicuously in pocket or wallet if the necessity should arise.

From this and the foregoing considerations we may conclude that it is incumbent upon each citizen to appraise his particular position in the community, in the family, and in life itself, in this respite of the cold war; to determine the adequacy *to him* of the documentation of that position; to supplement his personal documentation with whatever additional papers he might require should the cold war terminate explosively; to institute measures for the safeguarding of his most vital records, by depositing the original papers in a safer place or by storing security copies at one or more alternate sites; to provide for the destruction of documents that might be used against him, as well as documents the disclosure of which might injure others; and to include in his plans for the salvation of his potentially displaced family the possibility of carrying in its pockets the papers it will need for its survival and the preservation of its identity.

The Nation's Standard Paper For Permanent Records

BYRON WESTON CO. LINEN RECORD

BYRON WESTON CO. LINEN RECORD has been tested and approved by generations of public and business record keepers. Made wholly of new white cotton and linen clippings, it possesses to the highest degree the strength, ruling, writing, handling and erasing qualities essential for endur-

ing satisfaction in bound or loose-leaf records, documents and similar usages. For other records, select the right paper for any purpose from the complete Weston line of rag content ledger, bond and index papers. Write for complete information.

BYRON WESTON COMPANY • DALTON • MASSACHUSETTS

Makers of Papers for Public and Business Records — Since 1863
