

# 'The Brainiest Guy in Baseball'

Catcher-turned-spy Moe Berg was an eccentric enigma



(Photo by National Baseball Hall of Fame Library/MLB.com via Getty Images)

Washington Senators Moe Berg in a catching position in 1932 at an unspecified location. Above: Goudey Gum Company Moe Berg baseball card.

> In 1934, when the traveling All-American baseball team headed to Japan, the lineup included legends like Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig ... and a backup catcher named Moe Berg, whose lifetime average was a modest .243. Many wondered how he'd made the cut.

But while Berg was in Tokyo, he slipped away to the city's tallest building and took covert movies of the Tokyo harbor and munitions facilities. These would later be used to help plan U.S. bombing raids over Tokyo in 1942. "Whether or not this event marked the beginning of Berg's involvement in espionage, the Tokyo story forever labeled Berg as the most shadowy player in baseball history," notes NOVA online.

Indeed, the man who could speak 15 languages and came to be known as "the

brainiest guy in baseball," was an enigma to the end. But while the details of Berg's second career in espionage remain murky, much more is known about his first career as a professional baseball player.

Morris Berg was born to Russian-Jewish immigrants in a Manhattan tenement on March 2, 1902. The family moved to Newark, New Jersey, four years later, and it wasn't long before young Moe fell in love with America's greatest pastime. At 7, he joined a local baseball squad composed of Methodists. Already a bit eccentric, he took on the pseudonym "Runt Wolfe."

Moe's father Bernard, a pharmacist, couldn't understand his son's passion for baseball. Even after Moe transferred from New York University to Princeton

and found success as the team captain of the Princeton Tigers ball team (batting .611 against archrivals Harvard and Yale), Bernard still sent his son letters criticizing his participation in the sport.

Bernard, however, had to respect Moe's ability to balance baseball with serious study.

While commanding the shortstop position (he reportedly communicated plays in Latin), Moe also studied Latin, Sanskrit, French and other modern languages. He graduated magna cum laude from Princeton in 1923.

Berg faced a forked path after graduation. One option was Columbia Law School; the second was a professional baseball career. Not content to choose one over the other, he decided to simultaneously study law *and* play baseball.

Berg started his baseball career playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers on a \$5,000 annual contract (about \$70,000 today) before transferring to the Chicago White Sox in 1926. During his early years in the game, he kept up his studies, spending one winter at the Sorbonne in Paris and ultimately earning his law degree and passing the bar in 1930.

While with the White Sox, Berg switched from shortstop to catcher. A knee injury sustained soon after he made the shift would plague him for the rest of his baseball career, which ultimately spanned 15 seasons and included stints with the Cleveland Indians, Washington Senators and Boston Red Sox.

While he was never a star player, Berg was admired for his charm and

intellect, both on the field and off. In 1939, he dazzled audiences with his smarts when he appeared several times on the popular radio quiz show "Information Please." Baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis was so impressed he reportedly told him, "Berg, in just 30 minutes, you did more for baseball than I've done the entire time I've been commissioner."

Berg eventually transitioned to coaching, spending two seasons with the Boston Red Sox. Then, in January 1942, just days before his father died, Berg severed his ties to baseball—and entered the shadowy world of espionage.

He first spent time in Latin America, where he assessed U.S. troops, before

joining the Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA) in August 1943. Assigned to the Balkans desk, he parachuted into Yugoslavia to evaluate resistance efforts there and then hopped around Europe, assessing the state of Nazi Germany's nuclear program.

One particular mission, in Switzerland, has entered into the annals of spy legend. Berg was tasked with attending a lecture of German nuclear physicist Werner Heisenberg in Zurich. He needed to determine whether Heisenberg, in his work on nuclear energy, was helping the Nazis create a nuclear bomb. If there was evidence of collaboration, the pistol-toting Berg was to shoot Heisenberg on the spot.

No dramatic assassination occurred. Berg concluded that Germany's progress in the nuclear field was overstated and not connected with Heisenberg's work in energy science. Berg and Heisenberg even became friends after the war's end.

Berg retired from the OSS in August 1945, and the postwar years did not treat him kindly. He struggled to hold down a job, mooched off his friends and family, and never married. The tell-all autobiography that would describe his wartime spying activities in detail was promised but never written.

Moe Berg died on May 29, 1972, at the age of 70.

While we do not know his burial place, we do have record of his final words: "How did the Mets do today?"

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