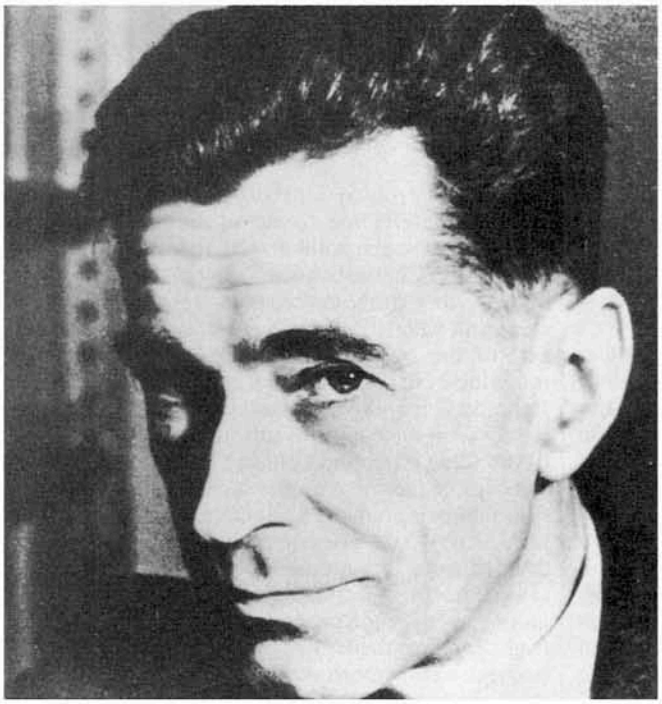
A merchant of light

R.V. Jones

The Griffin: The Greatest Untold Espionage Story of World War II.
By Arnold Kramish. *Houghton Mifflin: 1986. Pp. 294. $17.95.*

"THE GRIFFIN" of this book's title was Paul Rosbaud, who, as science adviser to the great German publishing house of Springer in the years before 1939, was acquainted with many scientists throughout Western Europe. He travelled widely and frequently, both in search of authors and in promoting the firm's publications.

Rosbaud, who had been born in 1896 and brought up as a Catholic, served with distinction in the Austrian Army in the First World War, after which he became a physics student in Berlin and took a doctorate at the Technische Hochschule. He then moved into publishing, joining Springer in the early 1930s. Alarmed by the rise of the Nazis, concerned by their treatment of his Jewish friends and holding a deep faith in the international character both of science and of the humanities, he used his many contacts to do all that he could to ease the problems of those whose welfare — and indeed lives — were increasingly under threat. And not only those threatened by the Nazis, for in 1935 he also tried to persuade the Russians to let Kapitza return to Cambridge after they had trapped him on a visit to Leningrad.



Paul Rosbaud — "a natural courier of messages between scientific friends across national frontiers;...".

With so many contacts in the world of pre-war science and with frequent opportunities for travel, Rosbaud was a natural courier of messages between scientific friends across national frontiers; and, from 1939 onwards, some of these messages could provide a means of intelligence. Opportunely, he had known and liked a member of the British Intelligence Service, Frank Foley, for some years. Because he remained in Germany, he could maintain a fringeing contact with German research laboratories, and from time to time he succeeded in getting information passed to London.

Rosbaud's life, particularly as an active agent in wartime Germany with ostensible reasons for visits abroad, is thus a promising subject for a biographer. It has now found one in Arnold Kramish, who was at one time a physicist in the American Atomic Energy Commission and at others attached to the Rand Corporation and the London School of Economics. Kramish has assiduously gathered details of Rosbaud's life and has delved into the murky world of Intelligence with considerable success. He has discovered much about Rosbaud that I for one did not know, even though I saw the most crucial of Rosbaud's reports that were successfully transmitted during the war, and though I came to know him fairly well afterwards when he lived in London and he wanted me to be the British editor of the new *Handbuch der Physik* — he had returned to publishing, only to have an unhappy relationship with Robert Maxwell who was, I believe, indebted to him for the name "Pergamon".

The clearest of Rosbaud's wartime contributions for which I can personally vouch was his letting us know about the doings and movements of the German nuclear physicists headed by Werner Heisenberg. Rosbaud was intensely alive to the possible release of nuclear energy, for it was he who had rushed the paper by Hahn and Strassmann on the new elements created by the neutron bombardment of uranium into the columns of *Naturwissenschaften* in early 1939. Rosbaud's wartime reports were particularly valuable because they led us correctly to conclude that work in Germany towards the release of nuclear energy had at no time gone beyond the research stage: his information thus calmed the fears that might otherwise have beset us. Kramish's description of Rosbaud's dangerous work in this connection by itself justifies the biography.

I cannot speak with such confidence about Rosbaud's other contributions to scientific intelligence that Kramish describes. Where he discusses events and characters with which I had direct contact, I sometimes have difficulty in reconciling his account with my own memories. He is handicapped by having to speculate too far from an inevitable sparsity of known facts, particularly on events inside the British Intelligence Service. Some of his speculations seem tendentious, and some of his descriptions are quite erroneous — "Sir Edward Appleton of the S.I.S.", for example, at least if S.I.S. has its normal connotation of the Secret Intelligence Service. Rutherford is surprisingly described as "certainly a theoretician" in contrast with Cockcroft; the V1 flying bomb was not a glider; and, so far as I know, phosphorescent materials are not "an important ingredient of heat-seeking sensors that guide missiles to their targets". Such examples contrast with the punctilious accuracy that Kramish sometimes achieves.

In other places he appears to have aspired to verisimilitude by adding naturalistic detail that he could not possible know — a charge that he himself properly lays in one instance against another author, Anthony Cave Brown. This concerns the mode of delivery of the Oslo Report, the package of information on new German weapons and techniques that was sent to the British Legation in Oslo from an anonymous source early in November 1939. The Report told us, for example, of a new radio ranging system that we later found the German pathfinders using in the Blitz, and of the two principal types of German radar equipment which we later discovered under the code-names Freya and Würzburg; other items included acoustically homing torpedoes, radio-controlled glider bombs, and large rockets with gyroscopic control. Peenemünde was also mentioned. Kramish himself claims to have discovered "beyond doubt" that the Report came from Rosbaud, and that "it seems indisputable" that it was delivered to the Legation by the hand of Odd Hassel, who later won a Nobel Prize.

It can be argued convincingly that Rosbaud had the qualifications and the motive to write the Report. He could perhaps also

have had the knowledge. Kramish speculates that Rosbaud had the opportunity to visit Oslo in November 1939; but he has to admit that although Rosbaud was there in September, Rosbaud himself stated after the war that he had no further contact with Hassel until December. So Kramish has to add to the conjectures with which the book is peppered the further one that Rosbaud's memory was at fault.

As for the speculation that Hassel handed the Report into the Legation, Kramish appears to have overlooked the positive statement by the officer who received it, the Naval Attaché, Captain Boyes, that it came in the form of letters "posted in Norway". That statement was available to Kramish, although he does not mention it. Had he done so, he might have proposed that Captain Boyes's memory, like Rosbaud's, was at fault.

Actually there is no need for either speculation, for Rosbaud did not write the Oslo Report: to my positive knowledge he had nothing to do either with its provenance or its transmission. At the same time, despite this substantial error, Kramish has performed a welcome service in ensuring a wider appreciation of those genuine and important contributions that Rosbaud so courageously made. □

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