

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY JULY 17, 2002

The Arts



Once Secret And Now On Display

Declassified: A Spy Museum Opens This Week in Washington

PHIL PATTON

WASHINGTON - "We were Q," said Jonna Mendez, a former chief of disguise for the Central Intelligence Agency, referring to the British technical expert who came up with whiz-bang weaponry for Agent 007. Mrs. Mendez and her husband, Antonio J. Mendez, are alumni of the C.I.A. Office of Technical Affairs. At what they sometimes call "the Magic Kingdom," they devised spy gadgets, bogus documents and disguises.

But unlike Q, who simply handed the gadgets over to James Bond, "we weren't just going to let James break some million-dollar device," Mrs. Mendez said. "We went along with James to be sure he knew how to use it."

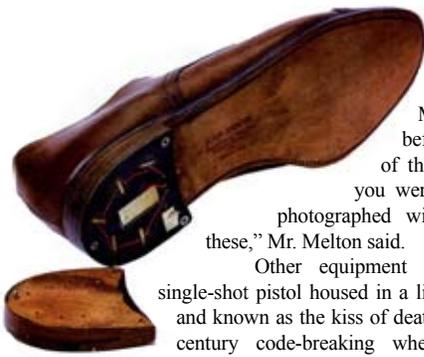
Lately the Mendezes have been playing a new role: they helped design the

\$40 million International Spy Museum in Washington, to open on Friday, at 800 F Street NW, a few blocks from the Federal Bureau of Investigation headquarters.

The museum, a for-profit venture developed by some of the founders of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, contains artifacts, many drawn from the collection of the military historian H. Keith Melton, along with interactive installations and multimedia exhibits. The devices include an overcoat with a camera lens in one of its buttons, tripped with a pocket shutter. "If



The museum was designed with input from Antonio and Jonna Mendez, retired from the C.I.A.



you visited Moscow before the end of the cold war you were probably photographed with one of these," Mr. Melton said.

Other equipment includes a single-shot pistol housed in a lipstick tube and known as the kiss of death, an 18th-century code-breaking wheel of the type used by Thomas Jefferson and an exploding tree stump. There is also an Aston Martin DB5 resembling the car driven by James Bond in "Goldfinger." (It does riot, however, have a working ejection seat or generate smoke.)

And though the museum has no official connection with the C.I.A. or other intelligence agencies, the C.I.A., seeking to burnish its image, has been informally helpful. Members of the museum's advisory board include the Mendezes, Mr. Melton, the former F.B.I. and C.I.A. director William H. Webster, and Oleg D. Kalugin, a former K.G.S. general renowned for organizing the elimination of a Bulgarian dissident with a poisoned umbrella (Last month, Mr. Kalugin, who now works for a counterintelligence research group in northern Virginia, was convicted of treason in absentia for revealing Soviet state secrets in his 1994 autobiography. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison.)

The Mendezes advised a team of professional designers on exhibits. Making the private world of espionage public means showing how much of it is like theater, they say. "The best spy is an actor," Mr. Mendez once wrote.

Mr. Mendez has even designed a disguise kit to be sold in the museum shop, though it is not likely to be as elaborate as the disguise technology he helped develop for the C.I.A. in collaboration with Hollywood makeup masters. One method - code 'named Dagger -lets a spy don a paper-thin mask in minutes, without help. The method is still classified, but from Mr. Mendez's accounts it sounds a lot like the peel off latex mask used by Tom Cruise in "Mission: Impossible 2."

More than a decade after they thought they had abandoned the clandestine world for a quiet life on a 40-acre farm in the mountains of western Virginia, the Mendezes have surprisingly found themselves in the middle of a second career. His first book, "The Master of Disguise," came out in 1999. The couple collaborated on the book "Spy Dust," due out this fall. They are also technical advisers to the CBS television show "The Agency," about the C.I.A.

He has a mustache as arid as she is several inches taller. One can't help thinking of, yes, Boris and Natasha.

During her years with the C.I.A., Mrs. Mendez worked with pinhole cameras and facial disguises. She once visited the first President Bush in disguise, then stripped off her false face right in the Oval Office to demonstrate the state of the disguise art for the startled president. "I made myself younger and considerably prettier and gave myself the hair I always wanted," she said.

Mr. Mendez ran intelligence operations in Moscow and in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. The highlight of his 30-year career came in 1979, when he smuggled or, as he put it, exfiltrated, six United States Embassy employees out of Iran during the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini. The legend, or cover story, he treated depicted those staff members as part of a film production unit seeking locations. To make the film seem real, Mr. Mendez even bought ads in Variety.

He met Jonna Heistand, his future wife, on an operation in Bangkok. She later succeeded him as chief of disguise. He retired in 1990, they married in 1991,

and she retired the next year.

Both had little to do with the agency until 1997, when a FedEx envelope brought Mr. Mendez the news that he had been chosen, one of 50 trailblazers honored as part of the agency's 50th-anniversary celebration. "They made Tony a kind of poster boy," Mrs. Mendez said.

Commemorating trailblazers was part of a campaign to improve the C.I.A.'s image by highlighting its positive achievements and declassifying previously hidden programs, like the Venona intercepts of Soviet cables in the late 1940's and the Corona spy satellite program of 1960. The image campaign came only after debate within the agency over how much it should tell the public about its work.

The Mendezes hope the museum will correct fantasies about spies. "We want to show that spies are not just romantic cowboys who ride off into action," Mrs. Mendez said. "There is a lot of method and planning. There are those who go out and climb over roofs, and there are those who are studious and sedentary. You might call one the dagger type and the other the cloak type."

The museum's executive director, E. Peter Earnest, is a former C.I.A. man with a neat gray mustache and a manner reminiscent of Walter Cronkite. He joined the C.I.A. in the late 1950's and worked in Europe and the Middle East, then took over its relations with the Senate in the late 70's, after the trying years of investigation into the agency's "family jewels," its most embarrassing secrets. Mr. Earnest can speak casually of Aldrich H. Ames, the C.I.A. mole, as "my friend Rick Ames," noting that Rick ran his story by me many times and never suspected a thing." He can sit down with his former opponent, Mr. Kalugin, and testify that "I now believe Oleg's motives were as noble as my own."

The museum was the idea of, Milton Maltz, a former disc jockey and owner of radio and television stations who helped found the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Mr. Maltz, who served in the Navy said he worked with the National Security Agency and in the process acquired a fascination with the world of intelligence. Dennis Barrie, board president was the first director of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

About 5 percent of the museum will be devoted to pop culture representations of the spy, Mr. Barrie said. After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the museum planners were careful to avoid seeming flip about spycraft.

The museum is housed in five restored buildings with a core of new construction. One is Le Droit, the oldest office building in Washington; another is the Atlas Building, headquarters of the American Communist Party from 1941 to 1948. Several firms helped shape the museum: SmithGroup Architects; Adamstein & Demetriou, the architects for the restaurant and cafe; and Gallagher, & Associates, exhibition designers, which created displays at several Smithsonian museums and the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Battery Park City in Manhattan.

Because many of the items by their nature disguise their purpose and are tiny "things that fit into a shoe heel or pocket," Mr. Barrie said - the museum will supplement them with film and videos. One videotaped interview discusses the unmasking of Mr. Ames by Sandy Grimes of the C.I.A. "the classic little old lady in tennis shoes," Mr. Earnest said, who painstakingly narrowed a list of suspects.

Beyond the gadgets and films, the experience of moving through the museum is part of its message. The presentation is a high concept one. The first exhibit visitors will encounter is a computerized "school for spies," where they will choose their own cover legends. Later they will be interrogated on the details. The

warning "All is not as it seems" is carved into a wall. Murmuring voices will seep from hidden speakers at the end of their tour visitors will find they have been secretly videotaped.

One room is modeled on the red-walled library of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the first boss, of the secret police under Lenin, where many hapless Russians were interrogated, and worse. Dzerzhinsky, for whom, the square in front of the former K.G.B. headquarters is named, pioneered the application of modern intelligence methods to a whole society, establishing, the model for the K.G.B., the Gestapo and Stasi. Visitors will experience the historical transition from World War II to the cold war by descending a staircase, symbolic of entering a fallout shelter. A constricted hall is devoted to Berlin during the cold war; it will contain a replica of the famous tunnel dug into East Berlin in the early 1960's to tap into East German phone lines.

A final space, the Ops Center, will present information updated to track current events and new revelations. In that area, other real life spies will show up frequently, Mr. Earnest promises. He plans conferences and book signings to make the museum the prime gathering place for the capital's large community of former intelligence workers.

Perhaps in the wake of 9/11, there is more tolerance for some of the more criticized practices, from C.I.A. history. Museum visitors will not learn much about C.I.A. efforts at destabilization or disinformation, payoffs to political parties, in other countries or network, the now illegal assassination of political enemies around the world. "

The Mendezes would like to see more openness. They argue that keeping secrets for too long prevents the intelligence agencies from learning the lessons of their own operations, successful or not. They keep secret even from each other," Mrs. Mendez said. On their farm, the Mendezes still spend a lot of time doing what they did in their earlier lives: painting and photographing. Mr. Mendez, who once painstakingly inscribed Farsi lettering on a fake passport, now paints landscapes in the open air. Mrs. Mendez, who once operated cameras that looked through walls, now takes large-format photographs. "No more pinholes," she said.

