



N.Y. / REGION

A Toast to a 100-Year-Old Spy Catcher

Metropolitan Diary

By BRAD VOGEL JAN. 21, 2016

Dear Diary:

Elephant tusks flanked the Jacobean fireplace and framed us as he shook my hand, his grip truly viselike, and I thought: “Wow. This Charlie Blaisdell is quite the centenarian.”

I had seen Charlie in action before, as we’re both members of the Circumnavigators Club, a group of individuals who have circled the globe at least once. So, in addition to his sheer age, I knew he had gone out to see the world, remained an entertaining public speaker and continued to work as an attorney up to the present day.

But, as we sat down in the parlor of the Explorers Club in early December following toasts from fellow Circumnavigators, the smoke wafting up from the candles on Charlie’s cake — his birthday was Nov. 27 — we finally had a true chat. And I learned about his time working for the F.B.I.

During the Roosevelt administration.

Gripping his cane and smiling regularly behind blue eyes, Charlie revealed that he was intimately involved in the arrest and detention of a German spy during World War II, at Times Square on New Year's Eve, 1944. A notorious German secret agent, Erich Gimpel, dropped off earlier in Maine by a Nazi submarine, was ultimately apprehended at a newsstand by Charlie's team of F.B.I. agents. He remembers all the details — down to the “tell” that tipped agents off to Gimpel (his propensity to pull cash from his left breast pocket to pay for things).

I have to admit, I just sat and stared for a few moments as he concluded the tale. So this is what a time machine looks like, I thought.

Happy 100th birthday, Charlie!

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