

Otto Goedecke – Houston, Texas

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Otto Goedecke settled in North Carolina in 1927. Already apprenticed in the cotton business in Bremen, Germany, he continued that career in North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Texas, where he became an American citizen in 1937. He also passed the bar, which served him well when dealing with the government during the war. The FBI submitted this telegram on Goedecke, proposing him for custodial detention:

Recommend following data be furnished Department [of Justice] for consideration arrest this United States citizen. Otto Goedecke, Jr., born Bremen, Germany, 1906, entered United States at Atlanta, Georgia, 1926, naturalized at Victoria, Texas, May 3, 1937, is cotton exporter and attorney at Hallettsville, Texas, where has resided past eight years, made trips to Germany 1928 and '33, imported Hans Luesnmann and Peter Mahn from Bremen, Germany in '33 to assist him in cotton exporting business which is suspected of being financed by H. Mahn and Co., Bremen, Germany, and which has suddenly prospered abnormally [sic], has attempted to purchase huge quantities of cotton for shipment to Spain, believed intended for ultimate shipment to Germany as 85 percent of cotton handled by company shipped to foreign ports, principally Scandinavian. Goedecke travels extensively by air, sends business code messages, is very secretive about activities, has been observed secretly studying maps of Europe, was member of *Deutscher Klub*, Dallas, Texas, received correspondence from German consul, San Francisco, has said United States needs dictatorship like

Hitler's. Goedecke has been recommended for custodial detention and photostatic card received from Bureau.¹

During the war the local draft people, the FBI, and various authorities tried to put him out of business by taking all of his help away.

Naturally he was also subject to the draft, and they did everything to try to take him into the service. He failed his physical exam, but they continued to try to give him problems. They took him to San Antonio for induction, knowing he could not pass the physical exam because of his health.

At one time, they froze all of his bank accounts, both corporate and personal, and it required about a month to get it all unfrozen. That caused quite a few problems—almost stopped the business.

They tried to arrest him, but being an attorney, knowing what his legal rights were, and knowing various judges stood him in good stead. They didn't stand a chance with that.

Q: How does the FBI summary that I sent you (above) compare to your knowledge of his activities?

“Born in Bremen, Germany, 1906,” is correct; “entered the United States,” not in “Atlanta,” but in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was “naturalized in Victoria, Texas,” is correct. He was a “cotton exporter and attorney,” and “Hallettsville” is correct. “Made trips to Germany.” Of course, he did; he was trying to sell his cotton.

He did bring over a gentleman, and they say "imported." I presume that means that he was a sponsor for them. Hans Linsmann was his executive vice president, and he stayed with my father until he died.

Peter Mahn I do not know, other than I know a Herbert Mahn² from Dallas, who was from Bremen, Germany. It is possible that my father assisted him in coming over, although he had other family who could have assisted him also.

A. Mahn Co. was his representative in Germany, and Adolf Mahn was one of the founders of that firm. They became well off during the First World War because they owned a lot of cotton. And at the end of the war, at the time of the devaluation of the Deutschmark, they had a good cotton inventory. After the devaluation, they made a lot of money on that. That's the way that most of the German firms were able to survive the devaluation and remain reasonably strong.

When they say he attempted to purchase huge quantities of cotton, well, he was the largest exporter to Germany and Japan after the war. In order to be that you had to have a volume of cotton. He also sold cotton to Spain, as well as to France and other countries in Europe. Our exports at that time were about 85 to 90 percent of our business.

My father did travel, but primarily after the war. During the war? Certainly not, because he couldn't travel.

We did use coded messages. There is a universal cotton code which at that time was called the "bunting code" that all cotton merchants utilized to save money on telex, or what at that time was used to send telegrams. You could express an entire term or entire sentence within your contract in five letters with this code. Somebody must have said that

to the FBI, because we had a staff of people who each morning had to decipher all of the telex messages that came in. And in the evening, as we sent out our offers, they had to encode them. So, you had a whole staff of coding people there, about five or six people who did nothing but that.

Q: Do you have any idea how many other cotton merchants would have been using the same kind of code?

No. In the United States, there were at least thirty to thirty-five firms that did exporting business at that time.

"Is very secretive about activities...." "Has been observed secretly studying maps of Europe." Well, if he sells cotton to a mill in Hof, Germany, and he has to deliver the cotton to Hof, he has to study the map to see how to get it there.

Q: In order to do business, and be successful at it, wouldn't he have had to keep things secret from competitors?

Oh, yes, certainly. It was a very competitive business. Today I carry on the cotton business. I do the same.

Q: What do you know about the "Deutscher Klub"?

Nothing. I have never heard of the Deutscher Klub in Dallas, Texas, and my father, being located in Hallettsville, would certainly not have been a member of the Deutscher Klub in Dallas. He would have no reason to be, other than if somebody was asking him to pay ten dollars to join it or something to support it.

Q: Do you know of any social or political clubs that he belonged to, or him talking about political things at home?

No, I don't. We talked about politics, yes, but he was not a member of any political group.

Q: It's mentioned here that somebody heard him say that he "liked the dictatorship."

I don't know if he ever said that or not, but I wouldn't think so. He left Germany exactly for that reason. He hated the conditions in Germany, and he saw that dictatorial future already coming in the late 20s. That's the reason he wanted to leave. He had gone through the First World War and had seen what had happened there. He and his family hungered very much during that period, and all of his life he had health problems because of that. He loved this country; it was the country he had selected. He made his fortune over here, so naturally he liked it. His family was nothing over there.

Q: When I sent you the report, were you surprised at what it said?

Yes, I was. I showed it to my brother, and he laughed about it too. He said, yes, he also recalls hearing about these types of things, but people were very jealous because he was successful, particularly in a small town. For that reason they tried everything they could to run him down. He lived in Hallettsville, which is a predominantly Czech and German community. And of course the Czechs didn't like the Germans in that community either.

Q: Was he the kind of man who offended people, or was he a gregarious and social man who was easy to get along with?

He was very strong willed. He was not a very social type of person. He didn't talk that much. He was very quick witted. Some people were afraid of him for that reason. He had a tendency to intimidate.

Finally there was the fact that he was friends with a German-American citizen who was the port director at Brownsville, Mr. Max Geisler. My father was well known to the people of North German Lloyd and all the steamship lines due to his cotton shipments. The army did not allow Geisler to remain in Brownsville, but they wanted him to stay as port director. So, they moved the office of the port of Brownsville to San Antonio!

Q: They didn't trust him to stay there, but he was so vital to the operation that they allowed him to run it from San Antonio?

That's right. He was making quite a port out of Brownsville. He and my father were very close friends. Our families would very often get together in Kerrville for vacations.³

Reviewers in the Justice Department's Special Defense Unit eventually removed Goedecke from the FBI's Custodial Detention List.

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Notes

1. FBIHQ File #100-2-21-35. Otto Goedecke's entire FBI file runs to 600 pages.
2. Herbert Mahn, interned 1941-1943, died in 1969 (Letter to the author from Herbert Mahn, Jr., Dallas, TX, Aug. 18, 1993).

3. Born in Bavaria, Geisler served in the submarine service of the Imperial German Navy during World War I. After the war, he joined the anticommunist underground and eventually enrolled in the Merchant Marine School. He immigrated to the United States in 1922, but had to return to Germany to reenter legally, which he did in 1928. He worked a few years for North German Lloyd, married in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1929, and became a U.S. citizen about 1930. He took the job as Port Director of Brownsville, Texas, in 1935.

His wife, Anne Marie, describes life in Brownsville as that of a small town where “everybody knew everybody.” She thinks that someone who did not like Geisler reported falsely to the FBI that he was signaling to U-boats from the beach, after the war had started. Others speculate that the FBI was told he had been a Nazi agent for years, and was furnishing German captains with vital information and maps of Texas coastal areas. The Southern Defense Command forced him to move fifty miles inland in November 1942.

The editor of the *Brownsville Herald* compared Geisler’s persecution to that of Christ and called him the “innocent victim of the very evils against which we

are fighting today.” Some prominent citizens intervened with General [Walter] Krueger, commander of the Southern Defense Command, and Geisler moved to San Antonio and ran the Port of Brownsville from there for a year and a half. He drowned accidentally in 1984 while swimming off Padre Island.

A historian of the Port of Brownsville reports that Geisler had come to be known as “Mr. Brownsville”—never without a plan, a dream, a hope—and that the volume of the port increased a hundred-fold during his nearly thirty year tenure as director.

A lover of parties, Geisler lived life to the fullest, often swearing off cigars, drinking, and rich food—but never for long. [Interview with Anne Marie Geisler, Brownsville, Texas, Nov. 20, 1994; Henry N. Ferguson, *The Port of Brownsville: A Maritime History of the Rio Grande Valley* (Brownsville, TX: Springman-King Press, 1976), 270–271, 280–282, 303–304. A transcript (106 pp.) of Geisler’s hearing (Oct. 9, 1942) and related documents can be found in, Eastern Defense Command, Exclusion Case Files, 1942–45, Max Geisler, Boxes 46–47, Washington National Records Center (Suitland, MD)].