

# George Chesnut, a spy who was Renaissance man

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was also a pianist**

## **OBITUARY |**

BY JOE HOLLEY  
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WASHINGTON — George Leoni Chesnut, a spy by day and a translator of biblical Greek by night, died Friday of pneumonia at Virginia Hospital Center in suburban Arlington County, Va. He was 89.

A translator of more than 50 languages, ancient and modern, he used his linguistic skills at the National Security Agency (NSA) for more than 30 years as a civilian director of its analytic section. He also taught Spanish part time at George Washington University.

After work, on weekends and in retirement, Mr. Chesnut translated children's poetry from Chinese to Spanish and English; compiled Serbian and Afghan Pashto dictionaries; translated a French movie script into English and biblical texts into Dinka, the language of southern Sudan. He considered his work with biblical Greek to be a divine calling and conducted seminars on the ancient language for area churches.

A man who believed in keeping his mind engaged, he calculated license-plate prime numbers while in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles and allowed others to go ahead of him until the prime-number plate he desired came up.

He also was an accomplished pianist. Although he never discussed his NSA work, family members could often determine how things

were going in Czechoslovakia or other world hot spots by how many Bach sonatas Mr. Chesnut played when he came home at night. A three-sonata night meant a crisis somewhere.

Mr. Chesnut was born in Waco, Texas, and grew up in Dallas. He enrolled at the University of Texas, Austin, at 15 and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in Spanish and German in four years.

He also studied linguistics at the University of Chicago and was working on his doctorate at the University of Michigan when pending war prompted him to take a position with the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. His job was to monitor German radio transmissions to South America in Spanish and Portuguese. (He was conversant in all the Romance languages and Russian.)

During World War II, Mr. Chesnut served as an officer in Naval Intelligence. Joining the NSA after his discharge, he was recalled to active duty during the Korean War, serving on Okinawa and Taiwan and in Washington. He returned to the NSA after the war and worked for the agency until his retirement in 1979.

Mr. Chesnut, a devoted environmentalist, belonged to St. Mary's Episcopal Church primarily because of its commitment to environmental concerns, and served on the Environmental Stewardship Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Virginia.

Survivors include his wife of 55 years, Louise Woolfolk Chesnut, of Arlington; two children, Anne Giddings Chesnut, of Charlottesville, Va., and John Winston Chesnut, of Los Osos, Calif.; and two grandsons.