

Bridge of Spies (12)

Eleven members watched the excellent Bridge of Spies on 9th April.

Tom Hanks stars as James Donovan, a New York insurance lawyer asked to defend an accused Russian Spy (Mark Rylance). Donovan persuades the trial judge to pass a custodial sentence rather than the death penalty, becoming the "second most hated man in America" by so doing (the spy being the most hated). As a consequence of his actions, Donovan receives a letter purporting to be from the spy's family, but which is in fact an attempt by the East German and Soviet governments to arrange an exchange of the spy with Gary Powers, the U-2 spy plane pilot who was shot down over Russia.

The US government asks Donovan to undertake the exchange negotiations in East Germany, unofficially of course, and he reluctantly agrees. The story unfolds of how Donovan manages to negotiate the exchange of both Powers and a detained American student, in the face of hostility from both the East German and US officials.

The film ends with the US government publicly thanking Donovan for his involvement, much to the surprise of his family, who thought he had been on a business trip to London.

This is a well crafted film, directed by Steven Spielberg. It evokes the sense of vulnerability in America in the late 50s and early 60s, and cleverly exposes the absurdities of the American legal system, as well as various prejudices of the Judiciary. The images of East Berlin, decrepit after the war, are stark, as is the killing of East Berliners trying to scale the Berlin Wall. Ian Lester commented about this: on a trip to Berlin, he saw signs in the Western section overlooking the Wall, which said — in German — "Think, don't shoot", in an attempt to get the East German guards to show some humanity to those trying to escape.

Overall, a thoroughly enjoyable and thought-provoking Cold War thriller.