The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The $2 Million Spy

By Richard Lourie

September 26, 2010



Russia was the big loser in the summer spy scandal when it lost its 10 "illegals." In the subsequent spy swap, Moscow also lost four Russians convicted of spying for the United States and Britain. To top it off, Russia also lost face, the use of illegals seeming laughably old-fashioned and unproductive.

Fortunately, the whole business did not upset the reset in U.S.-Russian relations. The United States treated it all as titillating entertainment, while Russia welcomed the illegals home, with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin even singing patriotic songs from an old Soviet spy film with them.

But there was one off-key note. On June 13, Sergei Tretyakov died at age 53 in the small Florida town of Osprey. A former colonel in the Foreign Intelligence Service, Tretyakov was the most important spy to defect since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He was also the most highly paid, having received more than $2 million from the U.S. government. His position as deputy station chief in New York responsible for all covert operations in New York and at the United Nations made it possible that he had fingered the 10 illegals. (Tretyakov spied for the

United States for three years before defecting in 2000.)

Even though Tretyakov died two weeks before the arrests of the illegals on June 27, this does not rule out that he was killed as an act of vengeance. CBS reported that the White House had been informed about the Russian agents under surveillance as early as February. A leak, or worse, could have occurred in this time.

Tretyakov's widow waited until the day of the actual swap, July 9, to announce her husband's death to deny his "former colleagues the luxury of flattering themselves that they punished Sergei." An odd statement. Though perhaps willing to make use of his death to intimidate other potential defectors, Tretyakov's "former colleagues" are the sort of people who prefer genuine revenge over poetic justice.

There were other reasons that made Tretyakov a likely target. As Pete Early, author of Tretyakov's biography "Comrade J," wrote: "The murders of [former FSB officer Alexander] Litvinenko and [Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna] Politkovskaya are reminders of how dangerous it can be for a defector from the Russian intelligence or a vocal critic of Russian leaders to speak out publicly. Sergei is both."

The strong circumstantial evidence linking Tretyakov's death to the arrest of the 10 illegals or to his "treasonous defection" lost all importance on Sept. 2, when Florida's District 12 chief medical examiner issued his autopsy report. It found that Tretyakov had choked to death on a piece of meat. One may well ask, "Why did it take almost three months to determine that a person choked on a piece of meat?" Complex toxicological tests had to be run to eliminate the possibility of some subtle poison. None was detected.

Unless you want to concoct fantastical paranoid plots with the medical examiner pressured into lying about a murder, the official version must be accepted. But it too has its own dark twists. Russia was routed in the last round 14-0 — a humiliating defeat. Tretyakov's "former colleagues" will at some point want to even the score.

"Traitors always end badly," Putin told reporters in July after meeting with the illegals. Russian intelligence agents who defected to the West should be careful where they park their cars and not accept drinks from strangers.

Richard Lourie is author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/26/the-2-million-spy-a1719