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Son of Russian Spies Wins Case to Remain a Canadian Citizen

Vavilov claimed he had no idea that his parents were spies until they were arrested.

By Reuters

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Vavilov, pictured in an interview last year, has been granted Canadian citizenship. **Alex Vavilov (CBC News: The National / Youtube)**

The son of Russian spies who was born in Canada and was stripped of his citizenship after his parents were arrested for espionage in the United States was affirmed as a Canadian citizen by the country's top court on Thursday.

Canada's Supreme Court unanimously upheld an earlier federal court ruling that said a 2014 administrative decision to strip Alexander Vavilov of his citizenship was unreasonable.

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The hit TV series "The Americans" was inspired in part by the story of Vavilov's family. His parents came to Canada in the 1980s under deep cover and assumed names, with the mission to immerse themselves in Western society as a sleeper cell that would activate on orders from Moscow.

The family later moved to Boston, where Vavilov's parents were arrested in 2010 and charged with spying. Vavilov's parents returned to Russia in a spy swap. Both Alexander and his older brother Timothy also were sent there.

"They didn't speak a word of Russian," said lawyer Hadayt Nazami, who represented Vavilov. "They didn't even know they had a Russian grandmother or that their parents were Russian."

Vavilov was born in Toronto in 1994, as was his brother, Timothy, four years earlier. The ruling will apply to both, Nazami said.

Vavilov will be in Toronto on Friday and is expected to speak to reporters in the afternoon, Nazami said.

"My understanding is that both brothers want to settle in Canada," Nazami told Reuters. "It will take time logistically, and they will be looking for work."

Children born in Canada normally automatically become Canadian citizens, but the Registrar of Citizenship said Alexander was an exception because his parents — as employees of a foreign government — were like diplomats.

The Supreme Court upheld a previous federal appeals court ruling saying that Vavilov's parents did not enjoy the "privileges and immunities" of diplomats and so the exception could not be applied to their son.

Andrey Bezrukov and Elena Vavilova used the aliases Donald Heathfield and Tracey Ann Foley — names lifted from two Canadian children who had died in infancy. They later admitted their real names to U.S. authorities.

The Vavilova brothers "thought it was a case of mistaken identity" when their parents were arrested, Nazami said. "When their parents admitted to the charges, they were in a taxi and heard it on the radio."

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