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U.S. Teacher's Letters Censored in Russian Prison, Family Says

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Fogel's family says he was carrying cannabis for medical reasons to treat chronic back pain. **video screenshot / Russian Interior Ministry**

An American teacher jailed on drug charges in Russia is being kept from communicating with family freely, his sister told CNN on Wednesday.

Marc Fogel, 61, was last month found guilty of drug acquisition, manufacture, smuggling and possession and sentenced to 14 years in a maximum-security prison.

Fogel's family says he was carrying cannabis for medical reasons to treat chronic back pain.

He was detained passing through customs at a Moscow airport in August when 11 grams of marijuana and eight grams of hash oil was reportedly found in his luggage.

Fogel's sister Anne Fogel said no one has heard his voice since his detention and the family has only received Russian-language letters.

"Everything goes through the censors. It's harrowing," she told CNN.

“He says what he wants in English, someone translates for him, one of his cellmates, and depending on how good their English is is how accurate of a picture we get of what is happening,” Fogel added.

“It’s very convoluted and it’s incredibly worrisome because we can’t really have an honest conversation.”

Fogel’s family is now pushing the U.S. State Department to declare him wrongfully detained, a designation applied to basketball star Brittney Griner, who is on trial on similar drug charges in Moscow.

Fogel had worked at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow until May 2021, acccording to the Russian authorities. He then apparently took up a teaching job at the Anglo-American School of Moscow.

“This is a person who has served the American diplomatic community in schools all over the world for well over the majority of his career,” Anne Fogel told CNN. “I need my president and first lady to stand up for him. He needs to come home.”

Fogel is among several Americans currently held in Russian prisons amid bilateral tensions, with Griner and former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan most prominent among them.

Another ex-Marine, Trevor Reed, was exchanged in April for Russian pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, who was convicted in the U.S. on drug smuggling charges.

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