

Mission to Helsinki: Negotiating on a Park Bench To Find a U.S. Double Agent

By Stanley Karnow

WE MUST have been a singular sight as we sat on a park bench in Helsinki and talked in hushed tones. Passers-by seemed to glance at us oddly, perhaps wondering what three ample figures in dark business suits, obviously foreigners, were doing there on a lovely autumn morning last year, when honest gentlemen are at work. But we, or at least they, were hard at work, trying to negotiate the complex case of Nicholas Shadrin.

Shadrin, a Russian-born American citizen, had left his wife at their hotel on the evening of Dec. 20, 1975, and walked to Vienna's main cathedral, the Votivkirche. He was a double agent, ostensibly representing U.S. intelligence while pretending to spy for the Kremlin: his purpose that evening was to meet two members of the KGB, the Soviet secret police. He has not been seen since on this side of the Iron Curtain. His case, which became public last week, is as intriguing as any espionage novel.

Efforts to locate him have involved former President Ford, Leonid Brezhnev, Henry Kissinger, Andrei Gromyko and Zbigniew Brzezinski, as well as an array of lesser U.S. and Russian officials.

I was also involved at one stage, conducting a minor but fascinating mission to Victor Louis, the KGB operative who performs various arcane functions for the Kremlin. It was that mission that landed me on the park bench in Helsinki beside Louis and Richard Copken, a young Washington lawyer who had been hired by Mrs. Blanka Shadrin to find her husband.

Like many reporters, I have known Louis for years. He is presumed to be a "disinformation" specialist for the KGB, but his disclosures have sometimes been solid. In late 1969, for example, he presented me with an exclusive account of his extraordinary visit to Taiwan, which was designed to signal to the Communist Chinese that their Nationalist enemies might be exploring an accom-

modation with the Soviet Union. I have also visited Louis at his country house near Moscow, where a tennis court, a swimming pool and a cellar filled with imports ranging from wine to corn flakes testify to the inequity of Soviet egalitarianism. He is a large, pleasant rascal whose rather awkward manner masks a certain cunning, and, at the risk of sounding cynical, I think he would allow that our acquaintance is based on mutual usefulness.

So it was that Copken, who learned of my link to Louis through Chestel Cooper, a former government official and friend, requested my assistance. This was the summer of last year, when Copken's channel to Wolfgang Vogel, the East German intermediary who arranged the trade of Soviet spy Rudolf Abel for U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers, had recently broken down. Could I induce Louis to help?

Copken is indefatigable, aggressive and humorless, a kind of human computer who carries a pocket calculator in order to figure out currency exchange rates to the third decimal point. I would want him on my side were I in trouble. I agreed to put him in touch with Louis, if I could, but on two conditions. First, he would tell me the full Shadrin story rather than the phony tale he was then peddling of an innocent Russian defector who had chosen freedom but was kidnapped by Soviet operatives while on a skiing trip in Austria. Secondly, he would give me first crack at publishing the complete story when we deemed it could be told without risking the chances for Shadrin's release.

IT IS NO EASY MATTER to telephone Moscow from Nantucket, where I had gone with my family on vacation. But I got through to Louis in early August, and, without revealing Copken's identity or any other substantive details, asked if he could meet us outside the

Soviet Union. Evidently accustomed to such mystery, Louis replied that he would in principle, and we would set a date in a later talk. A few days afterward, Louis called me from Helsinki, possibly to elude Soviet wire-tappers, and asked if this was going to be "a wild goose chase." I described the initiative as "important," and we fixed a rendezvous, Helsinki on Sept. 9.

Copaken recommended that we arrive in Helsinki a day early in order to get a good night's sleep before the next morning's conversations. As we took off, he extracted from his briefcase a mathematical puzzle that, he explained, was handmade by a wizard in Copenhagen. I persuaded him to put it away and instead fill me in on the Shadrin case from the voluminous files he carried.

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AT 10 THE NEXT morning, Louis was standing outside his hotel as we approached. "My room is probably bugged," he said, suggesting that a park might be better, and he steered us to a landscaped area that ran down the middle of a shopping street. We found an empty bench and sat in the sunshine. I explained that I had now finished my job, which was to bring them together, but I would like to listen if they had no objections. They assented, and Copaken recounted the Shadrin story, omitting the double agent part. He also emphasized somewhat grossly that an election campaign was coming in the United States and that the incident, if made public, could take on domestic political dimensions.

Louis had kept silent through most of Copaken's briefing, but now he had some comments and questions. In the first place, he asserted, Copaken had been wasting his time with the Vogel channel, as the Russians were loath to meddle in Germany since former Chancellor Willy Brandt had improved relations with Moscow. Then he went on to voice doubts about the entire Shadrin affair. How do you know Shadrin was kidnaped? How do you know he has not returned to the Soviet Union voluntarily? Have you considered that he might have gone off to Argentina to get away from his wife? Could he have been picked up by the East Germans or Romanians? "They do that sort of thing," Louis added rather disdainfully.

When Copaken implied, in answer to the first query, that U.S. intelligence agents knew Shadrin was meeting with two KGB operatives, I thought I heard Louis' brain click. "It's inconceivable that the CIA would permit a Soviet defector to meet two Russians in Vienna unless something significant was involved," he said. "This is more than a simple affair of abduction."

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THE DISCUSSION dragged on through the day, as we strolled across the park and lunched and dined, and although I had felt sure at the start that Louis knew nothing of the case beforehand, it was obvious that he had quickly sized it up. When Copaken contemplated various trading possibilities, Louis referred to the affair of Kim Philby, the British agent who had secretly worked for the Russians and finally retired in Moscow. "Put the shoe on the other foot," he said. "Imagine that Philby is captured by the British in West Berlin, and the Soviet Union demands his return. Would the British give him back? Especially when it's unclear whether he was kidnaped or went over voluntarily?"



Victor Louis

Copaken countered by pointing out that Shadrin was an American citizen, but Louis replied: "He didn't become an American just because of an act of Congress. From our viewpoint, he is still a Soviet citizen. Besides, there are rivalries inside the Kremlin, just as there are in Washington. The Soviet military establishment would oppose Shadrin's release."

During one interval, when Copaken had gone off with his pocket calculator to shop, Louis assumed a tough stance and scolded me: "We don't have to give information to anyone. The United States can't push us around. Remember, the Soviet Union is not Guatemala."

But then his voice switched to a plea. "Is this what brought you all the way from America?" he said. "It's senseless. Abducting people was the sort of thing we did in Stalin's day, but it's not done anymore. If this Shadrin was in fact kidnaped, it's an extraordinary case. And if it's an extraordinary case, there's not much I can do."

But later, over a dinner of crayfish and white wine, Louis surprised me by telling Copaken that he would try to help, and I can only speculate on his motives. First, he delights in the role of broker, since it enhances his reputation as an enigmatic figure with worldwide connections and thus, I would guess, makes him valuable to the KGB. Secondly, and in part for the same reason, he is always interested in self-serving deals. One bargain he essayed was for Copaken to get him authorization to visit Alaska, which is off limits to Russians.

The Victor Louis route, which Copaken pursued for months after, eventually ended in an impasse — as have all the other efforts on Shadrin's behalf. But Louis appears to have fulfilled his promise to try. He raised the Shadrin case in Moscow, but, as he recently confided to an American diplomat there, his inquiry evoked an "embarrassed silence."

Thus the day in Helsinki failed to return a man to his wife. Yet it furnished me with an insight that might serve those who tend to spin conspiratorial theories. The underground of spies and clandestine agents and covert intermediaries is as much of a bungle as any other business, and that is something we should all be thankful for.

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