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Sutyagin Recounts Prison Life and Spy Swap

By Howard Amos

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Igor Sutyagin, posing in central London last week, initially faced 106 FSB accusations, including an interview that he had given to The Moscow Times. **Akira Suemori**

LONDON — Igor Sutyagin, the only convicted spy from this summer's swap to profess his innocence, is an unlikely figure to have participated in the most dramatic public episode of international espionage since the Cold War.

"I would not defecate on the same field as them," Sutyagin said of his accusers.

"How can you be humiliated by a dog?" he said, softly. "You can be beaten ... but not humiliated."

Despite his disdainful words, Sutyagin, 45, spoke in a resigned, matter-of-fact tone during an interview with The Moscow Times in London, where he has been living since he was deposited there in July by a U.S. plane that collected him and three other Russians convicted of

espionage.

A small, quiet man with thinning hair and dressed in unassuming new clothes, he speaks broken English with a meticulous elegance. This former nuclear researcher has deeply invested his intelligence to refute the allegations first leveled at him 11 years ago.

In the interview, Sutyagin recounted a difficult prison life that included bright moments teaching English classes and even lecturing on nuclear bombs. He described his moral dilemma at being asked to sign a statement of guilt to secure the release of himself and the three other convicted spies. And he recalled his flight to freedom, which included goodie bags and whiskey courtesy of "big and intense" U.S. guards.

Sutyagin initially faced 106 accusations after Federal Security Service officers detained him while waiting for a taxi outside his apartment in the Kaluga region town of Obninsk in 1999. The allegations included an interview he had given to The Moscow Times, "an American business supported paper" (later dropped), and providing information on Russia's military capabilities to a Western-intelligence front organization registered in Britain called Alternative Futures (which he was convicted of).

Sutyagin, speaking in the interview Friday, acknowledged that he did not know whether Alternative Futures was a front. But he maintained that all the information he used for his reports was publicly available, noting that he had similar contracts with Swiss and Japanese companies.

Sometime in 2004, he said, as he tipped five sachets of sugar into his tea, he began to understand that FSB investigators "did not want to know the truth." Soon afterward, he was sentenced to 15 years.

11 Years in Prison

From his outward placidity to the novelty of wearing a wristwatch, it is clear that prison, "the world where nothing happens," as he put it, has left deep scars.

"Now it's a part of me, and that's why it's very difficult to cope with life" in London, he said.

After his sentencing, he was moved from his Moscow detention center to a series of penal colonies, the first near the Urals and, for the last five years of his imprisonment, just outside Arkhangelsk in the north of Russia.

He was never able to blend in with the other prisoners. "I could not hide or disappear," he recalled. "I was constantly under a floodlight."

He was told that the FSB phoned every month to check up on him. He said the guards admitted that they could never say he was living well — they were obliged, for their own sakes, to ensure that he was made uncomfortable. He spent many days performing some of the most dirty and difficult odd jobs in the prison's industrial area. Among other things, he unloaded logs and planks and helped build spindles to be wrapped with cable.

But his notoriety and education also brought relief. He taught English and once delivered a lecture to inmates and guards on "how a nuclear bomb explodes."

Letters proved another lifeline. In one penal colony of 1,260 men, he was the recipient of every 10th letter that arrived, he said. Although his own mail was read and often delayed, he wrote upward of 800 letters in his last five years. He said that now that he is free, and despite speaking to his family every day through Skype, they miss his correspondence and recently asked him to write more frequently.

Sutyagin's wife, two daughters and relatives made the 70-hour round trip to Arkhangelsk to see him for his allotted visiting times whenever they could. Only on one occasion was he moved from the tolerable "general conditions" to the more severe "strict conditions" — for 13 months. He was caught with a banned mobile phone in an incident that he is sure was contrived to give the authorities a pretext to refuse a plea for a presidential pardon he had submitted.

"I respect them for doing a good job," he said, without a hint of a smile.

The Swap

In early July, he was moved from Arkhangelsk back to the Lefortovo prison in Moscow. Sutyagin said he had no inkling that his release might be imminent. He only began to understand when he noticed a bag belonging to Sergei Skripal, convicted to 13 years in 2006 of passing the names of Russian agents to the British; heard talk of others in the building serving time for "Article 275," the article under which he had been imprisoned; and was photographed in a smart shirt and tie.

Shortly after this realization, he was ushered into the prison warden's office and introduced to two Russian generals and three Americans from the embassy. All gave only their first names. They told Sutyagin that their countries had agreed on an exchange of spies and that he was "on the list." He was to be flown to Britain but could return to Russia at any time — as long as he would confess.

Reluctant to sign, Sutyagin said he tried to gauge the situation by suggesting that he might refuse to cooperate. The Americans gave no direct response about the consequences. But the Russian generals, more visibly confused and agitated, told him that the exchange was one list for another and nobody would be freed if he was difficult.

Sutyagin signed a pre-typed confession within two hours. He was not granted access to a lawyer. He said he not only felt responsible for the fate of others but also caught up in forces outside his control.

"I can't stop a deal between two presidents — I can't be the stone which stops this deal," he explained. "You can imagine what would happen to that stone."

On July 9, Sutyagin was transferred to Domodedovo Airport along with Skripal and the two other convicted spies, Gennady Vasilenko and Alexander Zaporozhsky. Their plane to Vienna was a Russian government Yak-42 jet, and Sutyagin remembers its number, DRA42446, and name, Vladimir Kokkinaky, after the famous Soviet pilot.

"It was interesting for me," he said with a small grin by way of explanation for this feat of memory.

Although he did not yet know the names of the others he was with, he spoke a little to Skripal before they were separated by nervous guards inside the plane. Saddened by leaving Russia, he recalled that the others were "excited."

The plane landed in Vienna, where the four Russians were swapped for 10 Russian agents detained just weeks earlier in the United States.

Once in the American Boeing 767-200 and guarded by "big and intense" men in white shirts and black ties, the atmosphere became more jovial. They were all given a "goodie bag" containing, among other things, clothes and Russian movies. The other three wanted a drink to celebrate and, at the last moment, a bottle of whiskey was found.

Skripal and Sutyagin disembarked at the Brize Norton air base, about 105 kilometers west of London, and were driven to a hotel in West London. The other two Russians flew on to the United States.

Why Sutyagin?

Unlike the others included in the exchange, U.S. government officials have always denied that Sutyagin worked for them. His inclusion in the swap is described by officials as a humanitarian gesture.

Sutyagin himself believes that it was the publicity his case received that prompted his selection. Amnesty International as well as groups in Russia had long campaigned on his behalf, describing him as one of the first political prisoners of Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

After his arrival, he said, he met twice with a man he assumes was an MI5 liaison officer. They discussed how the Russians had explained the terms of the deal and, over lunch, chatted about the Soviet spy television series "Seventeen Moments of Spring." Since then, he has had no contact with any intelligence agency and no conditions have been placed on his freedom, he said.

In London

Sutyagin finds London "more human" than Russia and has been spending his time giving interviews and thanking friends and organizations for their support. He is living with friends.

Although he had the option of bringing a family member with him to London in July, he said he refused to permit them to uproot their lives and jobs. One close relative — he did not say which one — has visited him in Britain, and others will come once he has found his own accommodation.

Sutyagin has permission to stay in Britain for three more months and is looking into how to apply for a new visa.

Even though his friends warn against it, he thinks only of returning home. "I want to go back to Russia. It is my country," he said.

He may have a presidential pardon and foreign and internal passports, but he does not have the documents that are given to prisoners on their release. When he receives these, already

nearly three months late, he says he will return.

In an otherwise calm interview, Sutyagin only once betrayed a slight sign of checked emotion: when he talked of those who have subjected him and his family to their 11-year ordeal. "They do not deserve me to blame them," he said of his accusers. He compared his unobtrusive yet fierce fury to 19th-century Chechens who kept silent as their loved ones were buried: "You do not cry, you do not shout — that is [your] sign of anger."