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Soviet agent gets in to see a U.S. prisoner

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Government officials were trying last night to discover who allowed a Soviet propagandist into a federal prison in New York to interview a former Italian official, awaiting extradition to Italy, whom the Soviets have tried to link to the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II.

Iona Andronov, author of a book attempting to connect the CIA to the papal plot and now the New York correspondent for the Soviet weekly Lituraturnya Gazeta, wrote two articles based on his interviews with Francesco Pazienza, a former Italian intelligence official who is awaiting extradition on fraud charges.

A State Department official, who asked not to be identified, said he found it "hard to believe" that permission was granted for the Soviet journalist to interview the Italian prisoner.

Justice and State Department officials responsible for the case could not be reached for comment.

A spokesman for the federal Metropolitan Corrections Center in Manhattan said yesterday that Mr. Pazienza has been held at the center since March 4 of last year.

Kathy Morse, a spokesman for the Bureau of Prisons, said the bureau maintains an "open door policy" on allowing journalists to interview inmates but said suspects awaiting extradition "are not our inmates."

The State and Justice departments are the U.S. government agencies responsible for granting access to foreign nationals awaiting extradition, she said in a telephone interview.

The prison visit was first reported yesterday in the Wall Street Journal. Gordon Crovitz, a reporter for The Journal, said last night that Mr. Pazienza told him that he agreed to be interviewed by the the Soviet journalist to prevent the Soviets "from telling lies about me."

"If I sit [Mr. Andronov] down and talk with him, then he'll stop printing that I had anything to do with the pope plot," Mr. Pazienza was quoted as saying.

Mr. Andronov was one of the first Soviet journalists to publish press accounts charging that the CIA instigated the attempted assassination of the pope in 1981. In 1983, he wrote a book called "On the Wolf's Track," setting out this line of accusation, which was published in English in Sofia, Bulgaria.

In the Jan. 29 issue of Literaturnaya Gazeta, Mr. Andronov wrote that he had been "trying to get this interview for a long time."

"Ordinarily decisions in such cases are made quickly; however, in this case the question was deliberated for a long time by the New York prosecutor's office, after that by the Justice Department in Washington and finally by the State Department," Mr. Andronov wrote.

Earlier, on Jan. 15, Mr. Andronov wrote that Mr. Pazienza had called the Lituraturnya Gazeta and said: " 'Do you want to find out from the truth about the assassination of the pope? About this you will get the documents which will prove that . . . at this point the line was cut."

"How did he manage to call at all?" Mr. Andronov said.

He wrote that the person "best informed" about the plot to kill the pope was being held in New York in order to prevent him from testifying at the trial in Rome.

Since 1982, Soviet news agencies have charged that Mr. Pazienza met with accused papal assailant Mehmet Ali Agca in an Italian prison to arrange for Agca to confess that Bulgarian security agents were implicated in the pope plot.

Agca at first said in court testimony that he met with Mr. Pazienza, a former aide to the chief of Italian military intelligence. But he later said that he lied and had never met the Italian.

The trial of seven Bulgarians and Turks charged with conspiracy in connection with Agca's alleged attack on the pope is drawing to a close in Rome.

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