

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS
8 July 1984

USSR/U.S.
DEFECTOR

PALMER: A reminder tonight of an earlier time when our country first became concerned about a possible nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. It's much like the plot of spy novel. The scenerio? Espionage, panic, a man's flight from the United States to Russia, where he remained until his death in 1979. Bill Brown has a report

BROWN: In 1950, this couple, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested for espionage, giving secrets of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. Three years later, they were executed for that crime. At the same time, the FBI was investigating dozens of others who were also possibly involved with spying for the Russians. JACK O'TOOLE (retired FBI agent): After the Rosenbergs were picked up, and many people were interviewed in connection with that, after a period of time, people started vanishing in the sense that we would find later that they had gone through Mexico, many of them, and gone behind the Iron Curtain, and some gone to the Soviet Union.

BROWN: Jack O'Toole, a retired FBI agent, worked on the Rosenberg case. O'TOOLE: It was more or less, I would say, a pattern of panic that caused them to do these things.

BROWN: Alfred Sarant, seen in this FBI mug shot, was an engineer, a close friend of the Rosenbergs. Interrogated by the FBI, he was never charged with a crime, but he fled the United States and was last spotted in Mexico. For 30 years, no one, not even the FBI, knew the whereabouts of Alfred Sarrant, and for 30 years, no one, not even his family, ever heard from him. They own this Cadillac agency in Farmingdale, L.I. Dr. Mark *Cuchman, an emigre Russian teacher at Harvard University, is a student of Soviet scientific history. Interviewing one Soviet emigre scientist, he made a very strange discovery. DR.\MARK\CUCHMAN: The fact that his boss in the Soviet Union was an American-educated engineer, whose name in the Soviet Union was *Phillipe Gigorivich Styros.

BROWN: Dr. Cuchman learned that Styros helped develop the first computers for Russia; computers used by the Soviets for missile guidance systems. Intrigued, this professor turned detective, began searching Russian periodicals for information about Styros, an American with Greek origins. Just by chance, Cuchman read a book about the Rosenberg case, and he came across the name of Alfred Sarant, another Greek American. What if the disappeared American engineer wanted by the FBI and the famous Soviet military designer were one and the same. CUCHMAN: I got a photograph of American engineer, electrical engineer, Alfred Sarant, who was a friend of Julius Rosenberg, and I showed this photograph, first to his American colleagues, and he looked at the photograph and said, 'Oh yes, that's Alfred Sarant, my next door neighbor. I remember him quite well.' And then I showed the same photograph to a Soviet emigre. 'Oh, that's Phillipe Gregorivich Styros, my Soviet boss.'

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BROWN: What was his life like in the Soviet Union?

CUCHMAN: Very unhappy and very difficult on the personal and ideological level. I believe that his ideal of socialism suffered a very severe blow when he came face to face with Soviet social reality, but it was too late. The sin was already irreversible after he crossed the border.

BROWN: Bill Brown, NBC News, Farmindale, L.I.