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An Eastern Defector's Family Is Taken for a Ride Home

Europe

by Claire Sterling

ROME—Over the weekend of Nov. 12-13, the wife and young son of a Bulgarian defector living in Munich disappeared after boarding a train for Vienna. Suspicions that they had been kidnapped by Bulgarian agents were confirmed a few days later when Bulgaria's own state news agency announced that wife and son were both safe in Sofia, and "very happy" to be home.

The story seemed too commonplace to rate more than a short wire-service item in the West. In the precarious world of Eastern Europe's political emigres, things like this happen all the time.

Yet there was an extra element of raw, deliberate cruelty here that might be compared to a public flogging. The condemned man must not only be punished but must be seen to be punished, to make an unforgettable impression on his audience.

The Bulgarian in this case is no faceless emigre. He is Col. Stefan Sverdlev, the highest-ranking officer ever to defect from the Bulgarian secret service. He has been a magnet for Western reporters since Bulgaria was first implicated in the plot to kill Pope John Paul.

Lengthy interviews with Col. Sverdlev have appeared in dozens of publications, including the New York Times, Newsweek, the Reader's Digest, the left-wing Paris daily Liberation, the conservative Le Figaro and the Italian Socialist Party's Avanti. The burden of his message has been not only that Bulgaria was indeed behind the papal plot, but that its security service "is totally subordinate to Soviet policy, and entirely under the KGB's control."

Col. Sverdlev has been warned that he would "pay dearly" for this "treacherous behavior." Since last October, in fact, he has been No. 1 on a publicly circulated hit list of four "evil Bulgarian exiles," "dangerous traitors" taking part in "the wild and irresponsible anti-Bulgarian campaign which started in Italy."

The hit list was mailed out to the entire Bulgarian emigre community in West Germany, on a costly engraved letterhead bearing Bulgaria's coat-of-arms, by anonymous "intellectuals in exile." Like Col. Sverdlev, who headed the list, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 had "upset" Bulgarian leaders grievously—that was the word used—by insisting on Bulgaria's guilt before the whole world.

No. 2 was Vladimir Kostov, who had been through it before. First victim of the poisoned umbrella that made Bulgaria's secret agents famous—they attacked him with one in Paris, in April 1978—he was lucky enough to survive. (His compatriot Georgi Markov died after a stab in the thigh with an umbrella just like it, in London, a month later.) Since then, Mr. Kostov has been a highly effective broadcaster for Radio Free Europe in Munich.

No. 3 was Velicko Peikev. Formerly with Bulgaria's state information service in Sofia, Mr. Peikev grew up with the Bulgarian national Sergei Antonov, arrested in Rome just a year ago for alleged complicity in the papal plot. On the invitation of Investigating Judge Ilario Martella, Mr. Peikev visited Mr. Antonov in jail. His report of the meeting made quite a splash in the Italian press.

Mr. Antonov was most certainly "an intelligence agent in Rome," he later told the New York Times. "Antonov has lied repeatedly (since his arrest), even in small things, and the Italians can prove it. . . . Antonov is afraid. He knows he could spend a long time in prison. But even if he's sent back, he realizes his life would be in danger. He knows too much."

No. 4 was Iordan Mantarov. A senior intelligence officer in Bulgaria's Paris Embassy who defected in 1981, Mr. Mantarov caused an international sensation in his interview with the New York Times's Nicholas Gage last March 23. He claimed that a still higher-ranking friend in the Bulgarian security services had told him all about the papal plot beforehand, and provided Mr. Gage with some riveting details.

Officially, Bulgaria dismissed Mr. Mantarov as an impostor and a fraud, who had never even worked at the embassy. (U.S. intelligence analysts, tilting consistently toward Bulgaria on the whole case, also wrote off his story as "third-rate hearsay.") Yet it hardly seems likely that Bulgaria would put a mere impostor and fraud on so carefully selected a hit list as this one.

Evidently the regime in Sofia is determined to silence a very particular kind of Bulgarian emigre: the kind who can bear witness in the West to Bulgaria's role in the papal shooting.

The method used for Col. Sverdlev was classical entrapment. His wife Pavlina's 80-year-old mother in Bulgaria wrote on Nov. 4 that she had miraculously gotten permission to join a bus tour for Vienna the following weekend. This might be her last chance to see her daughter. Would Pavlina join her at the Hotel Fuchs in Vienna?

The Sverdlevs were not overly suspicious, because Pavlina's mother had miraculously gotten permission to make the same trip a year before, and nothing had happened when Pavlina joined her. This time, Pavlina even took along her 13-year-old son.

The pair never reached the Hotel Fuchs in Vienna. Neither did Pavlina's mother, who probably did not see through the fiction of her miraculous journey until it was too late. No busload of Bulgarian tourists showed up at the hotel either, nor had any reservations been made for them.

While Bulgaria does not customarily publicize its successful abductions of runaway citizens, it made a point of announcing this one. Nobody was going to be left in doubt about the fate in store for Col. Sverdlev's recklessly talkative gang of four.

"Pavlina and her son are in Bulgaria and enjoying the amnesty here," reported the Bulgarian telegraph agency four days after she and her son had vanished. "We have returned of our own free will . . . with the help of my mother. Our mother is capable of doing anything for the happiness of her child," Pavlina was quoted as saying. "We are very happy to be back and grateful for the human understanding surrounding us here. . . ." She had "dreamed" of coming back ever since her husband forced her to leave, added the Bulgarian news agency.

Pavlina and her husband had walked many miles through the night, carrying their five-month-old baby, to slip over the border into Greece in 1972. She did think often after that about coming back—exactly the way she was brought back. The thought, according to Col. Sverdlev, haunted both her and himself. Some might call that dreaming.

Claire Sterling, author of "The Terror Network," will soon publish "The Time of the Assassins" (Holt, Rinehart & Winston), a book about the shooting of the pope.