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Intrigue and Ambiguity in Cases of 4 Russians Sent to West in Spy Swap

By SCOTT SHANE and ELLEN BARRY

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When Aleksandr Zaporozhsky, one of four Russians delivered to the West in [this week's spy swap](#), landed at Dulles International Airport on Friday to join his family in the United States, it was only the latest unexpected twist in a classic story of espionage and deception.

For several years in the 1990s, Mr. Zaporozhsky, a colonel in Russian intelligence who became deputy chief of the American Department, was secretly working for the [C.I.A.](#), one of the highest-ranking American moles in history, Russian prosecutors say.

After surprising his colleagues by retiring suddenly in 1997, he moved with his wife and three children to the United States and went into business. But in 2001, confident that his C.I.A. link was unsuspected, Mr. Zaporozhsky was lured back to Moscow by his former colleagues for what they promised would be a festive K.G.B. anniversary party. He was arrested at the airport, convicted of espionage and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

On Friday, Mr. Zaporozhsky was flown to Vienna and then to the Washington area for the 10-for-4 spy exchange that promises to bring to a swift conclusion [the saga of the Russian spy ring exposed by the F.B.I.](#) early last week.

His Moscow lawyer, Maria A. Veselova, said Friday that she “did not find any proof of his guilt” in her review. But circumstantial evidence suggests that he may well have provided valuable information to the United States and was well rewarded for doing so. One account by a Russian security official published in January in the newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta claimed that Mr. Zaporozhsky, who it said was code-named The Scythian by his C.I.A. contacts, was given an estimated \$2 million in house purchases and other benefits by the Americans.

Another of the four, Sergei V. Skripal, also seems to fit the classic cold war model, though without quite the roller-coaster intrigue of the Zaporozhsky case. A retired colonel in Russia’s military intelligence service, Mr. Skripal was convicted in 2006 of having passed classified information to British intelligence, MI6, for a decade, in return for \$100,000 wired to a bank account in Spain.

But there is at least a little post-Communist ambiguity surrounding the two other men in the swap. Gennadi Vasilenko, a former K.G.B. major, was arrested in 1998 for contacts with a C.I.A. officer but soon released, only to be arrested again in 2005 and imprisoned not for spying, but for illegal trafficking in weapons and explosives.

And Igor V. Sutyagin, working at a Moscow think tank, did contract research for a British company that may or may not have been a front for Western intelligence. He has maintained his innocence, and human rights activists have defended him.

While all four men signed written confessions to espionage as a condition for their release — and then were immediately pardoned — some of the cases show how the definition of spying has grown murkier since relations have warmed between the United States and Russia. For an arms-control researcher like Mr. Sutyagin to supply information to a British company would have been unacceptable to the Kremlin in the 1970s. In more recent years, boundaries have not been so clear.

But American officials demanded precisely these four Russians as soon as talks about a swap began and valued them enough to make the lopsided trade. That suggests indebtedness on the side of the United States, said David Wise, a Washington author and veteran chronicler of espionage. “We obviously feel some obligation to them,” Mr. Wise said in an interview on Friday. “You don’t leave your men behind on the battlefield.”

The American willingness to quickly release 10 Russian agents operating inside the United States, after huge expenditures of money and manpower on a decade of surveillance, would have been hard to imagine a few decades ago. The stakes for American security seem far lower today, said Steven Aftergood, who studies government secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists. “Now it seems more comical than anything else,” he said.

But the case was never funny from the point of view of the 10 Russians who faced prison sentences here — and certainly not for the four Russians serving time in grim Russian prison camps.

Yelena P. Lebedeva-Romanova, a lawyer for the 59-year-old Mr. Skripal, said his release was especially welcome because he had diabetes and she worried about his health in the prison camp in the central Russian republic of Mordovia, where he was serving his sentence.

The relationship of Mr. Vasilenko, once a top-ranked Soviet volleyball player, with a particular C.I.A. officer, Jack Platt, has been well documented over the years. Mr. Platt has said in interviews that he tried repeatedly to recruit Mr. Vasilenko, who worked for the K.G.B. in Washington and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, but was rebuffed.

But in 1988, the K.G.B. learned of the contacts between the men, and Mr. Vasilenko was arrested in Havana and imprisoned in Russia for about six months before the espionage case against him fell apart. Years later, Mr. Vasilenko and Mr. Platt, both retired from their intelligence agencies, went into the private security and investigation business together.

But in 2005, when he was 64, Mr. Vasilenko, then providing security to a Moscow television channel, was rearrested and charged after a search of his home allegedly found pistols and TNT. He was convicted and remained imprisoned until his release for the exchange.

According to Maryland property records, Mr. Zaporozhsky still owns the house on a cul-de-sac in Cockeysville, north of Baltimore, where he lived until 2001 with his wife, Galina, and their three children. No one answered a knock at the door on Friday morning, and one son, Pavel Zaporozhsky, declined to comment by telephone.

Aleksandr Zaporozhsky might not want to risk another trip back to Russia. But he and the other three men who flew west on Friday are free to return when they wish, said Nikolai Kovalyov, a deputy in the State Duma and former director of the F.S.B., the successor to the domestic security operations of the K.G.B.

“There is no formal prohibition on this from the Russian side,” Mr. Kovalyov told RIA-Novosti on Friday.