

## Inside the CIA's bureau for hiding defectors

The agency set up a programme in the cold war to resettle foreign spies in America. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it may get busy again



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**By Bryan Denson and David Wolman**

**O**n a September morning in 2019, a horde of journalists stampeded into a tranquil suburb in Virginia and parked their TV trucks on the edge of a vast green lawn. Only days earlier, the six-bedroom home had been occupied by Oleg Smolenkov, a former Russian diplomat, and his family. Now it was empty.

The CIA had smuggled the family out of Russia two years earlier, a reward for the years Smolenkov spent spying for the agency as an aide to Vladimir Putin's foreign-policy adviser. Much of the evidence about Putin's secret campaign to sway the 2016 presidential election in Donald Trump's favour is thought to have come from Smolenkov, although the American government has not acknowledged this.

Five months after Trump took office, the baby-faced Smolenkov flew with his wife and three children to Porto Montenegro, a resort on the Adriatic Sea favoured by wealthy Russians. The Russian government had banned employees from travelling to Montenegro owing to friction between the two countries, but the Smolenkovs weren't planning to stay long. The CIA quickly spirited them away to America.

Once they landed, the Smolenkovs were greeted by officers from the National Resettlement Operations Centre (NROC), the CIA's little-known programme for foreign agents who defect to America. In the late spring of 2018, NROC officers helped the Smolenkovs start a new life in Stafford, a quiet community 40 miles south of the agency's headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

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Just months after the Smolenkovs bought the home on Partridge Lane (with nearly \$1m in CIA money), the agency learned that the real names of both Oleg and his wife Antonina had appeared on the deed. "Not standard operating procedure," said Joe Augustyn, a former director of the NROC programme. The CIA provides new identities for the bulk of foreign spies it resettles in America, he said, but some refuse to go along. "Sometimes", Augustyn said, "your name is all you have left in life."

Just before Smolenkov's flight to America, the CIA had re-examined the safety of its Russian defectors after Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence officer who had spied for Britain, nearly died from a poisoning carried out in England. The Smolenkovs' deed, in their true names, was just the kind of public record that Russian agents could use to find a turncoat and exact revenge. Before Smolenkov could become another victim, the CIA spirited him and his family away once more.

The future of spying might lean towards digital dragnets, mass surveillance and cyber-espionage, but a great deal of information-gathering can only be performed by humans willing to snoop on their own country at the behest of a rival nation. It's typically a freelance gig. Spies are motivated by revenge, ideology or, most often, money. The downside for them is that blown covers can lead to reprisals – sometimes deadly ones – by the regimes they have betrayed.

To prevent assets from suffering such fates, the 1949 Central Intelligence Agency Act set up a mechanism permitting American spymasters to take in as many as 100 defectors and family members every year. They are provided with permanent residence, financial compensation and lifelong support.

The bulk of defectors in the earliest years of the NROC programme hailed from the Soviet Union and other communist dictatorships: China, Cuba and North Korea. After the Soviet Union's collapse, the cataclysm of 9/11 and America's "war on terror" shifted attention away from Russia, and ushered in a wave of defectors from the Middle East. Now, with heightened tensions between Washington and Moscow, Russian assets who might provide the CIA with intelligence about the war in Ukraine are a priority once more.

Vladimir Putin's invasion is increasingly unpopular in Russia, and American intelligence officials expect a slew of new assets. Inevitably, the CIA will have to bring some of them in from the cold, since bad things can happen to those who spill the Kremlin's secrets.

In recent decades, at least two Russian defectors who fed information to MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, and then defected, were poisoned. In 2006 Alexander Litvinenko died after ingesting tea laced with polonium-210, a radioactive isotope, at a bar in the Millennium Hotel in London; in 2018 Skripal and his daughter were discovered slumped over on a park bench in Salisbury, poisoned with Novichok, a nerve agent. (They both survived.) This is to say nothing of the dozens of oligarchs and Russian officials – many of whom were vocal critics of the war in Ukraine – who've come to untimely ends over the past 12 months: they've fallen off yachts, down flights of stairs, out of hospital windows or supposedly committed suicide.

It is NROC's job to make sure this doesn't happen to foreign assets whom the CIA has resettled in America. In a world of misdirection and deceit, it is a rare bastion of good faith.

In 1999 George Tenet, then director of the CIA, called Joseph Augustyn into his office and asked him to take over the NROC programme – known to CIA denizens as "The Rock". Growing up in a tenement home in the blue-collar town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Augustyn devoured the novels of Ian Fleming, though he never aspired to a career with the agency. Excelling in his studies at a nearby state university, Augustyn eventually went on to receive his MA in Russian history at Brown University, after which he spent three years in a doctoral programme at Indiana University's Russian and East European Institute. There, a professor encouraged him to consider the CIA.

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Augustyn applied to the agency in 1975. That autumn, an FBI agent came to the family home in New Bedford to conduct a routine background check, but no one was home. “Joey! The FBI was here lookin’ for you,” Augustyn recalls his neighbour telling him afterwards. “They knocked on the door and they said, ‘FBI.’ I told ‘em I didn’t do nothin’...and I told ‘em you didn’t do nothin’ either.”

Augustyn’s first position was working as an analyst of Soviet propaganda. He found the job rewarding, but he wanted to be a case officer – a bona fide spy in the field who recruits agents. Although he didn’t have the blue-blooded background of many CIA officers at the time, he nonetheless climbed the ranks. He owed his success, he believes, to his hardscrabble upbringing, which taught him to remain constantly wary of his surroundings.

Over the next two decades Augustyn would go on to run anti-narcotics operations in Asia and other missions that remain classified today. He lived under an alias, wore disguises, dined with military leaders, and spent so much time away from his family that today he calculates the amount in years. Tenet’s offer – a job babysitting yesterday’s spies – didn’t seem like the place for a “hot-shot case officer” like Augustyn.

But the boss wanted Augustyn to shake things up. Tenet had heard reports that defectors who’d risked their lives for America weren’t faring well in civilian life. He wanted Augustyn to review cases going back decades and make whatever changes to NROC he deemed necessary, even if it meant giving former spies more money.

“Keep them happy, Joe,” Tenet said, concluding the meeting. Then, only half joking, “And I don’t ever want to hear from you.” Augustyn knew precisely what he meant. If you’re the director of the CIA, no news about defectors is good news.

**T**he CIA determines which spies make it into its resettlement programme on a case-by-case basis. A single meeting with a CIA officer in Kabul or Shanghai will not get you a first-class ticket to a new life in Las Vegas. Indeed, bringing defectors to America is a last resort. It’s hazardous and expensive, and it forces the CIA to find new sources. As one officer who worked at NROC said of spies resettled in the United States: “They’re not helping us if they’re here!”

The agency’s first job is to get the defectors out of their own countries. Field officers run those exfiltration operations, and they’re often harrowing. Augustyn isn’t permitted to give details but did not deny that the agency’s tactics have included smuggling defectors in the trunks of cars, hiking across snowy borders and taking off in private jets from remote runways.

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Once, Augustyn received an urgent communication about a particularly hurried exfiltration that was under way. The walls were closing in fast on a source and his CIA handler needed to get him out. But there was one hitch.

“What is it?” Augustyn asked.

“He wants to bring his cats,” the officer replied.

Augustyn, not a cat lover, rolled his eyes.

“Okay,” he said. “He can bring the cats.”

“The thing is, there are 35 of them,” the officer said. What followed was a series of rushed calls, as CIA officers created a new identity for the man, cleared him and the animals for entry into America, and ensured that he could lawfully possess his clowder.

Some exfiltrations mark the first time that family members learn about their spouse’s or parent’s secret life. Imagine the trauma, Augustyn said, of a stranger showing up at your home in the middle of the night saying, “Your husband is going to die tomorrow if you don’t come with us. Oh, and don’t ask too many questions.” One of Augustyn’s colleagues teared up in an interview when recalling a defector who was not able to bring his children.



Die another day: Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian defector, in a London hospital after being poisoned (*above*). Investigators in Salisbury wearing hazmat suits following the poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal (*inset left*) in 2018 (*below*)

Once on American shores, defectors are debriefed by CIA officers, providing whatever last snippets of up-to-date intelligence they may possess. They are also assigned a case officer, who looks after needs as varied as language training and job placement, medical problems and property transactions, substance-abuse counselling and tangles with the law. To protect against the threat of a double agent slipping into the resettlement programme, case officers use aliases, take circuitous routes into and out of meetings with defectors – “dry cleaning”, in spy parlance – and are forbidden from entertaining ex-spies at their homes. Nor are NROC’s charges generally allowed at CIA headquarters, let alone inside the resettlement office itself, which is kept deliberately separate from Langley.

During this early phase, Augustyn said, the new arrivals often seem euphoric. The agency has plucked them out of harm’s way and treated them like celebrities. Defectors have new houses, money and can breathe easily.

**A**s the initial exultation fades, however, ex-spies face a host of psychological challenges, for which no amount of generosity from the CIA can compensate. There is, of course, the fear of being hunted by their former countrymen. “That’s why the life of a defector sucks,” Augustyn said. “The nice house, the stipend – none of that can eliminate the fear that today might be the day when the people you betrayed finally settle the score.”

Others find it difficult to trust the CIA, especially when they come from countries with brutal security services. Augustyn recalled the story of one defector who was so disoriented in his new life that he found it impossible to believe that the CIA was on his side. At one point, his resettlement officer at the Rock suggested they go for a walk so he could assuage the man’s fears face-to-face. They drove to a local park, whereupon the defector fell to his knees and begged for his life. He assumed he was about to be killed.

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**“These guys were nuclear scientists, then they’re delivering pizza in Topeka”**

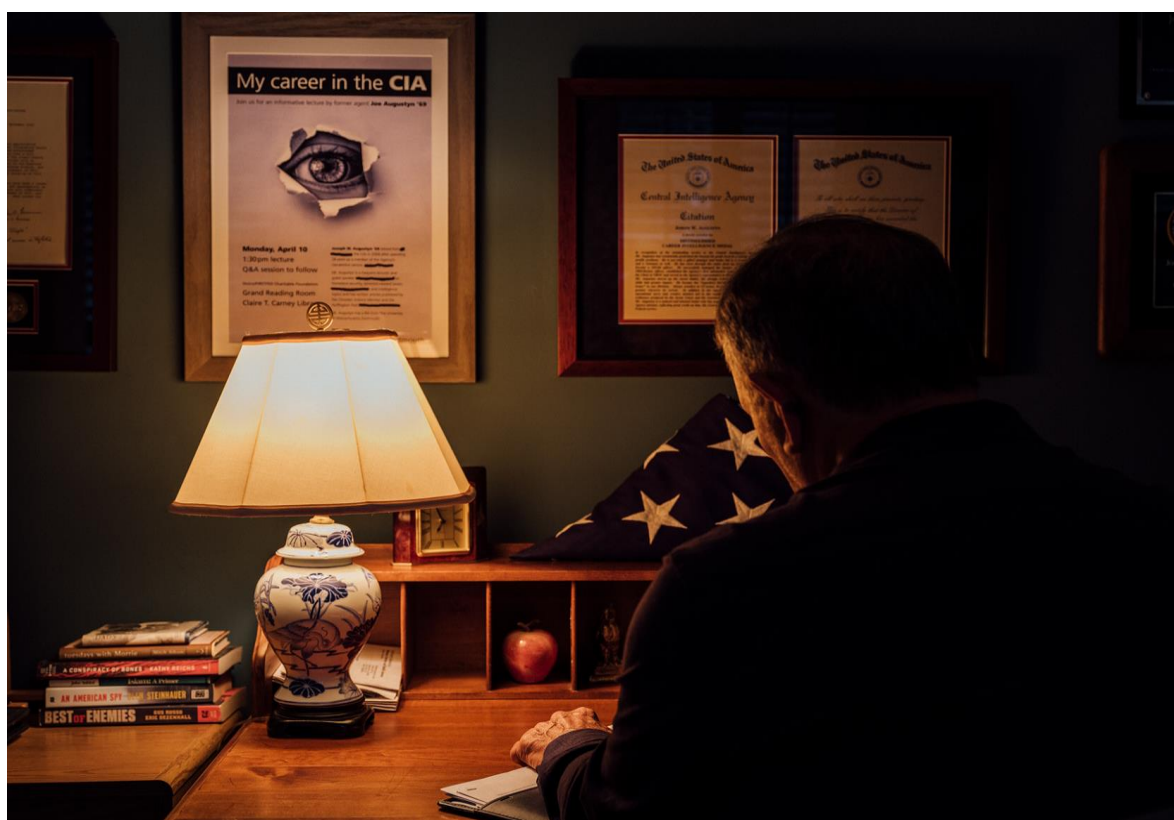
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Equally taxing for former spies is the loss of the life they left behind. Gradually, they start to feel what it really means to be cut off from their homelands and their previous existence as people of influence. As one former colleague of Augustyn’s put it: “These guys were nuclear scientists, then they’re delivering pizza in Topeka.”

Many former spies cope with their frustrations by becoming serial complainers. The noisiest of all, Augustyn recalled, was a Soviet-bloc diplomat who performed espionage for the CIA and later defected with his wife. The couple, identified in court papers as John and Jane Doe, brought a lawsuit against the agency, accusing it of failing to pay them sufficiently. The case made it all the way to the Supreme Court, and a ruling in favour of the couple would have meant that any defector protected by NROC would have been in a position to sue for a higher allowance. In the end, the court ruled against the disgruntled couple. (The reasoning, according to one expert in CIA legal affairs: “You can’t sue the government based on a secret contract.”)

Other NROC defectors make more modest, if still considerable demands. Some have requested a meeting with the president or the director of the CIA, and the agency has occasionally agreed. One man insisted that the CIA pay for his reverse-vasectomy. Another asked that NROC buy him a Steinway grand piano, while yet another demanded that the CIA arrange for his daughter, a mediocre tennis player, to receive a tennis scholarship to Stanford University.

That scholarship was never awarded, but Augustyn has on at least one occasion helped the child of a defecting spy get into university. The student was qualified for the programme but had none of the typical documentation – birth certificate, transcripts, official test scores. Augustyn flew to meet campus officials. He explained that this was the child of a defector. Though he could provide no further details, he – and by extension the CIA – vouched for the kid. Not long after, an acceptance letter arrived in the mail.



Joseph Augustyn at home in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Unlike America's Witness Security Program, to which NROC is sometimes compared, defecting spies can't be kicked out of the CIA programme for bad behaviour. Cutting them loose isn't an option, which sometimes made Augustyn himself responsible for volatile situations.

He found the day-to-day handling of defectors to be a bit like high-wire socialwork, with moments of panic and dark comedy. He recounted one incident when a case officer was summoned to the home of a defector to break up a domestic dispute. As the officer pulled into the driveway, the couple, both naked, tore out of the house, with the man wielding a meat cleaver. The NROC official managed to defuse the situation and arranged for police to release the couple with minimal fuss.

“They’re high-strung,” Augustyn said of defecting spies. “They’re risk-takers. They’re not your milquetoast normal person, right?” They also tend to have outsized egos, he noted. “They think they’re smarter than you are.”

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According to David L. Charney, a psychiatrist who advises the American intelligence services on the psychology of spies, defectors are beset by guilt, paranoia and existential uncertainty. Nearly all are men. Most felt mistreated by their employers and want revenge. What drives them? “Male ego,” Charney said. “An intolerable sense of personal failure as privately defined by that person.”

Many defectors were not model citizens in their previous lives, and have grown accustomed to playing fast and loose with the law. On New Year’s Eve in 1999, Augustyn stayed at home with his family to watch televised coverage of the ball drop in Times Square. At 10pm, the phone rang. The chief of police in a major city said he was at a downtown hotel, where a party had grown out of control. When confronted, the party host said he was with the CIA.

“Is this one of your guys?” the police officer asked.

Augustyn: “Well, I know who he is, yes. What’s going on?”

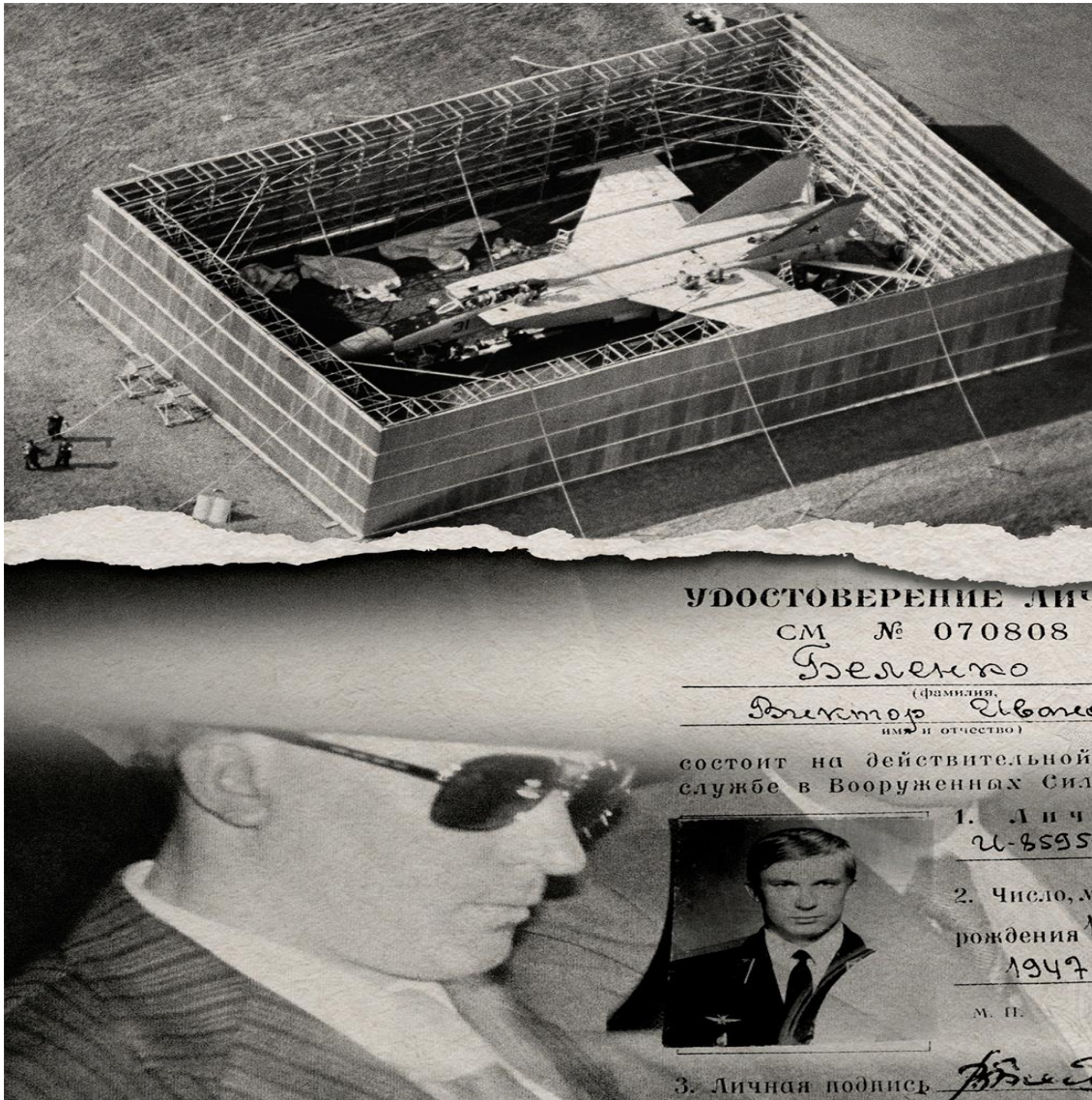
The police chief explained that the man had rented out the top floors of the hotel and was hosting an orgy. He had also handed out gas masks and was collecting sperm from the men in attendance. Apparently the revellers hoped to get a head start on rebuilding human civilisation, should the apocalyptic prophecies of the implosion of the world’s digital infrastructure come true.

“Well, I just wanted you to know,” the police chief said. There wasn’t much Augustyn could say beyond confirming that the man was indeed connected to the CIA. It was a brief read-between-the-lines conversation and Augustyn was hoping for discretion. “We’ll take care of it,” the police chief said. The cops broke up the party, and no one at NROC had to greet the new millennium with word of a defector’s arrest.

**T**hroughout his years at NROC, Augustyn worked to fulfil his promise to Tenet, connecting with defectors all across America. He felt lucky to meet some of the programme’s ornaments, famous cold-war spies including Yuri Nosenko, who



assured American officials that Lee Harvey Oswald had never been an agent of the KGB, and who spent three years in CIA detention before convincing the agency that his defection was genuine; Viktor Belenko, a Soviet pilot who in 1976 landed his MiG-25 jet in Japan, where Americans were allowed to examine the plane; and Ryszard Kuklinski, the Polish army colonel who passed the CIA 40,000 pages of documents detailing the deepest secrets of the Warsaw Pact.



For US spies only A Soviet MiG-25 jet, which Viktor Belenko landed in Japan, where it was examined by the Americans (*above*). Belenko on his way to an airport in Tokyo, bound for America to seek asylum (*below*)

Augustyn prided himself on those in-person visits, especially with more obscure defectors. After all, these people, too, risked their lives for America. “I had...an Iraqi defector, who showed me marks on his hand from cigarette burns that Saddam would give him if he was one minute late for a meeting,” Augustyn said.

“I had good relationships with many of these spies,” Augustyn recalled. “That was part of my job – to improve the system, to make them know we’re taking care of them.” They called him “Joe”, though the last name he used was a CIA alias.

In some cases, Augustyn was able to increase the level of material support given to particular defectors. Early in his tenure, he was shocked to see how little money a former spy from eastern Europe was receiving. Her teeth had been kicked in while clandestinely working for America, yet now she had to toil at a menial job to augment her CIA stipend. Augustyn got on a plane to meet her. As they ate ham-and-cheese sandwiches together in the living room of her small bungalow, Augustyn told her the good news: the CIA was going to more than double her award.

**O**f all the defectors managed by NROC, Augustyn grew closest to a former KGB colonel named Alexander Zaporozhsky. A high-value spy, Zaporozhsky had pointed American intelligence officials to two of the most notorious double agents in American history: Aldrich Ames, a CIA officer whose betrayals led to the executions of at least ten Soviet agents working for America; and Robert Hansen, an FBI agent who sold America’s strategies in the event of nuclear war to the KGB. For his counter-intelligence work, Zaporozhsky earned a reported \$2m. He also demanded to be picked up in a Cadillac for meetings with his NROC officer, and the CIA obliged.

In the autumn of 2000, a few years after his defection, Zaporozhsky joined Augustyn at a seafood restaurant just outside Washington. Over the years, the two had become something like friends. The Russian had risked his life helping American officials identify traitors in their midst; Augustyn figured a seafood lunch every few weeks was the least he could do.

Augustyn and Zaporozhsky enjoyed each other’s company, and the meet-ups grew more frequent. “He wasn’t there just for a free lunch,” Augustyn said. “You do business, and you become friends – it’s not unusual.” Once, Augustyn and his wife even attended a party at Zaporozhsky’s home in a gated community near Baltimore, Maryland.



**You only live twice** Alexander Zaporozhsky returned to Russia after defecting to America. He was convicted of spying and sentenced to 18 years hard labour (*left*). Yuri Nosenko defected to America in 1964 (*right*).

They were deep into their lunches when the burly Russian with the thick moustache looked up from his plate. "I'm going back," he said.

"Where?" Augustyn asked.

"I'm going back to Russia. I'm going to visit friends."

Augustyn blanched. "What're you talking about?"

"I have a reunion."

"A reunion of what?"

Zaporozhsky told Augustyn that he had been invited back for a gathering of former KGB officers.

"Alex, you *can't* go back."

Zaporozhsky lifted a forefinger and wagged it in front of his nose. "No, no, no. I've already been told I can go back."

"You're gonna get *arrested*," Augustyn said. "You're still a wanted man."

It was Augustyn's job to worry. Zaporozhsky, once an extremely valuable double agent, seemed set on a course that would not only put him in danger, but also could embarrass the CIA and jeopardise America's national security. If one of America's most treasured Russian operatives ended up dead in a cell in Moscow, spies and would-be spies worldwide might think twice before working for America.

A few days later, Augustyn and the CIA's director of counter-intelligence tried once more to dissuade the headstrong former colonel, but to no avail. They didn't know it then, but Zaporozhsky was rumoured to have a mistress in Russia whom he was eager to see. When the three men stood and shook hands to say goodbye, Augustyn looked Zaporozhsky in the eyes.

"I'm never gonna see you again," he said.

The CIA had no authority to prevent Zaporozhsky from leaving. Once defectors are resettled by the agency inside the United States, they hold the same rights as other Americans.

Several weeks later Zaporozhsky flew to Moscow with a round ticket. When his plane landed, Russian agents seized him and put him in irons. Back at the Rock, Augustyn opened a secure email message informing him of Zaporozhsky's arrest. *Goddammit*, he thought. *Now what?*

Zaporozhsky was convicted of espionage and high treason in 2003, and sentenced to 18 years of hard labour. After his retirement in 2004, Augustyn thought often about Zaporozhsky and imagined the horrid conditions he faced inside Moscow's Lefortovo Prison. Augustyn hoped, and sometimes prayed, that America would one day get him back.

Then, in June 2010, the FBI uncovered a network of deep-cover Russian spies living and working in America. They were part of Directorate S, the so-called illegals programme that inspired the television series "The Americans". Those arrests provided America with bargaining chips to trade for Russian spies who had worked for the West.

One of them was Zaporozhsky. He had lost nearly a decade of freedom, and his wife had died while he was imprisoned. But he was headed to America once more, part of the biggest spy swap since the cold war.

Some of Augustyn's former NROC colleagues remained bitter that Zaporozhsky had dismissed their advice and walked into an obvious trap, endangering not only himself but the CIA's ability to do business in the marketplace of stolen secrets. But Augustyn was delighted to learn of Zaporozhsky's return, and had long ago forgiven him. "It's like having a kid, right? The kid does something stupid. You're not gonna disown him."

Augustyn would have enjoyed a reunion with the former spy, but he knew there was no way that would ever happen. Zaporozhsky was now in the hands of the new team at NROC, while Augustyn was a retired outsider with no clearance. He would never get the chance to welcome him home, eat lunch with him again or offer his condolences about the death of his wife.

"It's the agency way," he said.

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*Portraits: Daniel Månsson. Additional images: Getty, Alamy*