

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

A cryptic plan, Russian intelligence and the code name SPLINTER

By Robert Eringer

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The most curious liaison relationship I created for Prince Albert of Monaco while directing his intelligence service was with a Russian introduced to me as representing the FSB (Russian internal security), supposedly with a direct line into President Vladimir Putin.

Soon after Albert ascended the throne and became the ruling sovereign (mid-2005), we commenced a program of creating liaison relationships with intelligence services beyond the CIA and Britain's Secret Intelligence Service. I had in mind the French, Italian and other European services, which I hoped were willing to share intelligence and cooperate with us.

"Why stop there?" asked my close confidant, a former senior officer of Britain's MI6. "Would you like to meet somebody very senior in the Russian FSB?" Why not?

My MI6 friend (who, for the purposes of this column I shall henceforth refer to as MI6) phoned me a few days later to report that "Sergey swooped on it like a hawk." From the Russian's perspective, he said, much was happening in Monaco. Sergey wanted to meet Prince Albert as soon as possible.

PROVERB AND PRETEND PROFUNDITY

Sergey swaggered into the bar of Hotel Hermitage in Monte Carlo just before 11 p.m.

He had a gruff, formidable presence, if comically garbed in white slacks and shiny white loafers, and was accompanied by Oksana, his interpreter — also his lover, it would soon transpire.

The Russian spoke little English. He had jet-back (dyed) hair and misaligned eyes that eluded contact. He'd look away when spoken to, affecting aloofness, as if he could care less what anyone had to say. When he spoke, he alternated between cliché, proverb and pretend profundity.

As MI6 told me later, "He's ex-special forces. To get where he's gotten, you must crawl over broken glass and hot coals."

We ambled across Place du Casino to Café de Paris and sat in the open-air for a very late supper. When the waiter tried to pour a glass of wine for Oksana, Sergey snarled at her, "No wine." To further impress MI6 and me with his command, Sergey told us he'd met the French prime minister earlier in the day.

I outlined what we — our service — had in mind for a liaison relationship.

Sergey said, “Yeah, that’s fine, but I need to hear it from the prince.

“If he’s serious,” sneered Sergey, “there’s much we can do. The prince has much trouble to deal with in Monaco.”

I replied, “At the risk of sounding immodest, that’s why I’m here.”

TALKING POINTS

When Prince Albert arrived at our safehouse next morning, I deferred to MI6 for briefing him on Sergey, whom we expected to arrive at any moment, before providing my own “Talking Points”:

“1) We wish to open a secret, unofficial liaison with Russian special services to address our mutual concerns: organized crime, money laundering and terrorism.

“2) Robert Eringer is my intelligence adviser. Everything goes through him, and he reports only to me. Eringer’s role, and his relationship with me, is separate from Monaco’s government structure. When you speak with him, it is like speaking with me.

“3) We have no tolerance for terrorist finance in Monaco. If you have information that terrorists from Chechnya keep money in Monaco, we will work with you and take measures.”

MI6 offered this addendum: The Russians should not try any “wet stuff” against oligarchs on Monaco territory before descending to greet Sergey, leaving Albert and me to discuss other matters.

Soon Sergey sauntered into the living room and, as he shook the prince’s hand, finally smiled. Around our conference table, Albert ran through my talking points. Sergey grunted.

I mentioned our interest in a particular Russian national who had become resident in Monaco. Sergey confirmed that he was rotten, but added, “He has no blood on his hands — he can be controlled.”

I mentioned a Serbian target.

Sergey remained quiet and poker-faced until we provided him room to fill the silence. “We can tame these people,” he finally said. “Or deal with them conclusively if you wish.”

The prince and I exchanged glances and, miraculously, kept straight faces.

Two hours later, we reassembled (minus the prince) on the port for an afternoon cruise. Sergey had worn a coat and tie for his meeting with Albert but now reverted to his casual look, including a jazzy silk shirt with blue stripes and black fish unbuttoned halfway down his husky chest.

We cruised into Villefranche and berthed for lunch at La Mere Germaine for pouilly fume, lobster salad and grilled turbot. Sergey warmed up significantly, mostly because he’d met the prince.

In typical Russian tradition, he initiated about a dozen toasts to the success of our new relationship. He finally made eye contact, more of an eyeball grip, a challenge I always welcome. We finished with flaming crepes splashed with Grand Marnier and snifters of a 1975 Armagnac.

During a stroll at our last stop, Menton, Sergey draped his arm around my shoulder and invited me to his 50th birthday party come November in Moscow. (My previous counterintelligence missions for the FBI precluded attendance.) He treated me like his new best friend but hadn't told me anything he didn't want me to know.

A SUNDAY DRIVE

Oksana, Sergey's interpreter, invited me to lunch the following day, a Sunday, requesting I plant myself outside the grand Hotel Negresco in Nice at 12:10 p.m. precisely. I was on time; they were 20 minutes late (so much for punctuality, a tenet of good intelligence work).

Their driver, Olivier, a Frenchman (and probably DST informant) drove a large black Mercedes with Monaco tags. I climbed into the backseat with Oksana, and, to the soothing strains of Rachmaninoff, we rolled toward St. Paul de Vence.

Sergey turned to face me. "Are you comfortable?" (This is what KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov would ask traitors, in person, at their prison cells, the night before their execution.)

"Yes, thanks."

Sergey was less concerned about Oksana's comfort. Although she wore stiletto heels, Sergey made her walk the perimeter of St. Paul, up and down stairs, on mostly cobblestoned streets, as he serenaded me with more phony profundity.

We drove on to Bacon, a Michelin-starred restaurant on Cap d'Antibes. Sergey told me he'd been a customer there for 10 years. Here was a Russian government official living like an oligarch, paying everything in cash, which Oksana produced from her purse in thick wads. He bossed the restaurant's staff to a point where I was sure they would sabotage his meal. I ordered ravioli stuffed with Loup (sea bass) and truffle in a pepper cream sauce, followed by bouillabaisse, which may be the best I've ever had, perfectly paired with Montrachet chardonnay.

I asked Sergey if he thought he was under surveillance. He told me they (the French) watched him only the first day. "The driver thinks we are rich Russians who want to buy a villa."

What if the driver is a French agent? I posed.

"If he's a problem," Sergey growled with bravado, "he'll end up in a forest. Or a desert."

Sergey cracked spiny lobster shells with his teeth and revealed "the two biggest threats facing Albert and Monaco": 1) Prominent Monegasque families. 2) The French. Corrupt deals, he added, were intermingled between both categories.

It seemed to me that he knew what he was talking about, as I had deduced the same after two years in service to the prince.

He told me the French special services kept close tabs on Albert wherever he traveled, whatever he did. "Someone with a very close position to the prince reports everything to the French — and very fast," he added. (I knew by this time to guess who.)

Sergey grew solemn and told me that "one-third of Monaco's government wants to see Albert fail." And he specifically requested I convey this message to the prince: "The danger comes from those closest to you."

It is vital, he added, that the prince demonstrate strong leadership early on to prevent the French government and prominent Monegasque families from running Monaco. (On that point I wholeheartedly agreed, but motivating Albert to grow a backbone and take control was a vastly different story.)

We drove silently in dense traffic back to Hotel Hermitage, where I got out and said goodbye. Sergey said he'd call, and we'd meet again soon.

As I turned to leave, Olivier the driver pressed to take me where I wanted to go. I said, "No thanks, I'll walk," at which point he became very insistent, offering twice more to drive me onward — almost a demand. I declined—and dry-cleaned my trail all the way back to our safehouse.

THE REUBEN CONSPIRACY

A few weeks later, at Sergey's request, I flew to Frankfurt for the day. He and Oksana met me at the airport with a large black Mercedes and we were driven to Schlosshotel Kronberg.

Posturing himself as a lover of nature, Sergey insisted on a long stroll through the grounds, part landscaped, part wild. About our Serbian target, he said, "Bad man, arms deals. I can get rid of him in two months if you want."

I did not want Sergey to get rid of anyone on our behalf, though his Mafiosi-like language amused me.

Although I would have been happier with a frankfurter and sauerkraut, Sergey took charge of ordering a gourmet meal of scallops and cucumber followed by veal with foie gras, lubricated with a bottle of fine Riesling.

Sipping on carrot juice and cream, Sergey told me he had not seen President Vladimir Putin between our first meeting in Monaco and now, "but he knows and approves."

Next, Sergey told me that Simon Reuben (a British national of dubious character who resided in Monaco) connects to "those Reubens in the United States."

"What Reubens in the United States?" I asked.

"The State Department and the finance minister," replied Sergey.

Huh?

He seemed to be suggesting that former State Department spokesman James Rubin and Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin were both related to one large *Reuben Conspiracy*.

Is Sergey wacko or what? I scribbled into my journal. (MI6 later explained it as an expression of old school Russian anti-Semitism.)

"THE PLAN"

In Washington, one week later, former CIA spymaster Clair George expressed astonishment when I recounted my experiences with Sergey. He said every intelligence service in Europe was now placing a question mark after my name. "Keep the mystery spinning," he counseled.

Less amused was the high-level CIA team I met for dinner in a private room at Dante Ristorante in Falls Church, Va. They tried to talk me out of having anything more to do with Sergey (or

Russians in general) and promised to set up a briefing for me on the overlap shared by Russian intelligence and organized crime.

But this Russian soon returned to Monaco with Oksana, and we met in the Bar Americaine of Hotel de Paris. The French, he said, had been monitoring his movements since his first trip to Monaco in early June. This trip, he added, they tailed him all the way from Nice Airport to Monaco.

Sergey insisted on hosting me for dinner in The Grill Room atop Hotel de Paris, where we were served four courses: lobster ravioli with truffles, Le Loup, a selection of cheese and chocolate soufflé — and two bottles of an excellent Chablis.

He provided a report, which I had requested, on Gocha Arivadze, ex-operator of ARSI gas stations in Russia, which validated what we already knew about him. Mr. Arivadze's infiltration of Prince Albert's social orbit had recently intensified as he strove to use the royal court as his own playground while attempting to choreograph a back channel to Vladimir Putin.

This was Sergey's strategy for dealing with bad guys: "If you can't stop them, become head of them." It was such a role, as Godfather, to which Sergey aspired. He would solve all our problems in his own version of a Faustian pact.

The prince agreed to a second meeting with Sergey, which again took place in our safehouse. The Russian announced that he had a plan. He asked for a pen and a single piece of letter-size paper onto which he drew three squares in a row, like a cartoon strip.

Sergey titled the first square "Politic," beneath which he drew two circles attached to each other, one large and the other small. Inside the small circle he wrote "Monaco." Inside the large circle he wrote "F" and a question mark. (I assumed this stood for *France*.)

Inside box No. 2 (he used Roman numerals), Sergey wrote "Business" (his spelling). Next to that, he scribbled a dollar sign with an arrow pointing downward. In box No. 3, Sergey drew a circle within which he scribbled an arrow pointing — as if it were a numberless clock — at 2:30. Beneath the circle, he drew a diamond shape inside which he wrote the fraction for one-half.

I hope one day either a symbolist or a psychiatrist will explain to me what these three boxes mean. I'll venture a guess that Sergey's "plan" was that he would handle all the prince's problems for half of the profits, as he seemed to be angling for an unspecified deal, and finally said, "It's up to you — you're in charge."

I saw Prince Albert out to the elevator.

"Do you like the plan?" I asked, straight-faced.

Albert nodded and said simply, "I'm going to strangle you."

SPLINTER

Next day I went cruising the Med again with Oksana and Sergey, who sat ramrod straight, staring ahead, expressionless. We berthed at Cannes and strolled the Croisette, settling for lunch at Hotel Carlton's buffet by the beach.

I invited Sergey to attend the party we had planned to celebrate the prince's investiture.

“Nyet,” he replied. (That went for Oksana too.) However, said Sergey, he would like to meet my newest friend, the interior minister of Latvia, with whom I’d just created a liaison relationship. Could I arrange that?

“If he wants to meet you,” I said.

The highlight of this cruise took place upon berthing in Monaco’s port. As Sergey walked the wooden plank, he suddenly squealed in pain. Something had pierced his foot and, the way he carried on for several minutes, I was certain he must have severed a toe. But on inspection, all Sergey suffered was a tiny splinter. Teary-eyed, he demanded a needle, antiseptic ointment and bandages.

This tough guy, supposedly from “special operations,” was a crybaby — or perhaps a hypochondriac. (On two occasions inside restaurants he’d ordered a table change due to a mild draft, worrying aloud that he might catch a cold.)

From that point on our codename for Sergey was SPLINTER.

“IT’S ALL ABOUT THE MONEY”

Next evening, MI6 and I joined SPLINTER and Oksana, along with Latvia’s interior minister, Eric Jacobsons (EJ), for dinner at Hotel Metropole.

Over excellent Bordeaux, sautéed foie gras and pork belly, we toasted mankind and mutual objectives against bad guys, until conversation turned philosophical, and I asked each to identify their childhood hero.

“Ah, Robert is playing psychological games,” said SPLINTER.

MI6 referred to himself as something of a nerd as a child. His hero had been Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher. Mine was Mighty Mouse. And SPLINTER chose, instead, to talk about how he found God while being held hostage by Chechen terrorists. Perhaps he did this for the benefit of EJ, an ordained Lutheran minister — for it seemed SPLINTER’s mission this evening was to cultivate the Latvian for possible recruitment.

On my next trip to Washington, my first meeting (as usual) was with Clair George.

I tried my best to explain SPLINTER’s “Three Box” Plan.

Clair sighed. “It’s all about money,” he said. “The mystique around your prince is akin to a billion-dollar treasure hunt.”

A HORSE WITH NO NAME (FILLED WITH COGNAC)

Back in Monaco, SPLINTER showed up again (having discovered Monaco, he could not stay away). I meant to take him out to a casual dinner of sushi, but he took control and insisted I manifest myself at Hotel Metropole for foie gras, truffles and caviar — and \$600 bottles of wine. On his agenda: A meeting between the Prince and President Putin in Moscow. This would be a favor to the prince, he added, for the purpose of “elevating his stature.”

“He’d probably be more interested in meeting the female gymnastics team,” I said tongue-in-cheek though, sadly, it was true. (Plus, I knew, from an intelligence service, that Mr. Putin had recently embarked on an affair with a Russian gymnast.)

My quip was lost on this humorless Russian, who suddenly became paranoid about the number of “Hindus” (Indians) on the Metropole restaurant’s wait staff. Their “hovering” bothered him terribly.

It became a kind of game for me to needle him with humor.

“The prince needs a princess,” I’d say. “Choose a dozen of your most beautiful women, and I’ll interview them myself.” (To which he later responded, through MI6: “Please tell Robert that Putin will not supply women for the prince.”)

SPLINTER confided that corruption in the Russian government “is now 99%.” (He implied that he was struggling to remain in the un-corruptible 1%.)

“Anything new on the Serbian?” I asked.

“Why are you so focused on him?”

“What about the Chernoy brothers?”

SPLINTER grew irritated. “Why are you interested? They’re not in Monaco.”

“Simon Reuben bought his way back into Monaco, and he connects to the Chernoy,” I replied. “We discussed this in Frankfurt, remember?”

SPLINTER waved this topic away and brought up an interest of his own: Jean-Paul Carteron from Switzerland, resident in Monaco where he ran a mini-Davos type annual summit. What did we know about him?

“He learned humanitarianism from Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier in the Dominican Republic,” I said. “It goes downhill from there.”

Would I mind sending him a report on Carteron? Sergey asked.

Maybe, I said — what about the Serb and the Chernoy?

It went on like this, greased by fine cuisine and superb wine.

Next day, SPLINTER insisted on taking me to the Grill Room for dinner on my birthday. We changed tables twice due to a “draft” — and SPLINTER complained to our server when a woman seated nearby sneezed into a handkerchief several times.

That evening I saw a different side to him — thoughtful yet talkative. He postured himself as democratic believer in God. He expressed disillusionment and unhappiness with President Putin and his corrupt cronies in Moscow and St. Petersburg, adding that Mr. Putin himself was corrupt.

To get the job of president, said SPLINTER, Mr. Putin had been forced to compromise himself by granting deals that made assorted Russians very, very wealthy. Now they blackmailed him and closeted him away from the “good” people (such as himself), SPLINTER said.

Everyone in Moscow focused on the Putin/crony-get-rich paradigm, he added. Boris Berezovsky, the exiled oligarch, knew much about the corrupt crony deals that allowed Mr. Putin to succeed President Boris Yeltsin, and that was why President Putin and his gangsters wanted Mr. Berezovsky dead. (They eventually succeeded.) SPLINTER told me that Mr. Putin had personally ordered the FSB to poison Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko.

“Why was Yukos Oil targeted by Putin for prosecution and not Lukoil or Sibneft?” I asked.

“They are equally to blame and share guilt,” SPLINTER replied. “It is not fair that Khodokovsky (the Yukos chief) was singled out (and jailed) while the others go free.”

SPLINTER divulged the reason for his interest in Jean-Paul Carteron: He believed that Carteron, through the Bulgarians, connected to the Chechens — and the Chechens were SPLINTER’s worst nightmare.

SPLINTER had been expecting a promotion. Was he bitter this hadn’t happened? Was he angling for recruitment by a Western intelligence service?

“I’ve discovered democracy,” he had said. “But it’s expensive.”

We ate our way through sautéed foie gras, Le Loup, and a Grand Marnier soufflé, climaxed with a 1962 Armagnac. As usual, Oksana paid with cash.

For my birthday, SPLINTER gifted me a glass horse filled with Napoleon cognac.

It went un-drunk.

ENDGAME

Soon thereafter, SPLINTER breezed into town yet again. MI6 and I met him in Hotel de Paris.

SPLINTER had delved into Jean-Paul Carteron and determined he “reports to the French,” adding that Mr. Carteron has been “a French intelligence agent for 20 years.”

It would have made sense for the French DGSE to recruit Mr. Carteron while he was handling the affairs of Papa Doc, then Baby Doc Duvalier. The DGSE would have encouraged Mr. Carteron, while at the United Nations, to ingratiate himself with Central European and Balkan leaders. Furthermore, it would be in DGSE’s interest to sponsor Mr. Carteron’s summits secretly, first in Switzerland, later in Monaco — as a way of trying to recruit individuals they hand-picked for Carteron to invite.

We could therefore assume that whatever DGSE, and therefore the French government, knew and believed about Monaco, much of it came from Mr. Carteron.

SPLINTER went on to say that Dan Francu, a corrupt Romanian we were investigating after he became a resident of Monaco using false paperwork, had been a CIA agent for 10 years before returning to Romania to help reform his country; that CIA was behind Mr. Francu’s presence in Monaco “because of his connections to Arabs.”

This made no sense.

I must take pause to point out that intelligence collection is only the first phase of what an intelligence service must do. The ongoing evaluation of sources, the questioning of their motives and assessment of their reporting, is next. And after that, one must analyze what has been collected. Sometimes, like life itself, raw intelligence simply does not make sense.

But that doesn’t mean one disregards the nonsensical because it doesn’t fit into a paradigm or theory or slot. This isn’t a novel or a movie, where all the pieces must fit and ultimately provide resolution with all loose ends neatly tied.

A source like SPLINTER may be right about one thing and wrong about another, either because he has been misled by others or because he's trying to mislead — or he's trying to inject his own opinion disguised as fact.

Collection, assessment and analysis are an ongoing process with the objective to cross-source, eliminate duplicate sourcing, try to nail down the facts and, ultimately, provide informed judgments and recommendations to those who make decisions.

SPLINTER also told us that Prince Rainier had supported Italian money laundering. Based on my knowledge (and I knew an awful lot by now, emphasis on “awful”), I would suppose this to be true, as part of Rainier's strategy to transform his principality from a Mediterranean backwater into a thriving financial center and tax haven.

The money laundering from Italy stopped after Prince Rainier's death, SPLINTER added. I would also concur with this. The money launderers had indeed paused, temporarily, to assess what Prince Albert meant by introducing a “new ethic” to the principality.

I left SPLINTER and MI6 so they could chat privately on matters that did not concern me. Afterward, MI6 reappeared at our safehouse.

“SPLINTER has the jitters,” he said. “He asked me, does Prince Albert really want to know this stuff?”

This was a very astute question.

More and more, it seemed to me, Albert did not want to know; that he was more preoccupied with his social life, his next date, than knowing stuff about which he would then be expected to do something.

I countered that SPLINTER, on certain topics, was either lying or crazy.

“What's frightening,” replied MI6, “is that the Russians may really believe this stuff.”

Which may partly explain why Russians in Russia now buy into Mr. Putin's so-called “denazification of Ukraine” campaign.

Alas, we eventually discovered that SPLINTER had misidentified himself to us.

How?

At our request, the French DST provided us with copies of Russian passports used by SPLINTER and Oksana — in their real names — to France.

Of all our 20 liaison relationships with foreign intelligence services, only the Russians were deceptive.

GAVIN NEWSPEAK

Gavin is lying again.

Gov. Newsom is running ads in Florida, trying to rustle up a presidential campaign (while disingenuously claiming he isn't to Joe Biden's beleaguered orderlies) against that other Sunshine State governor, Rick DeSantis, whom he clearly perceives as his main Republican rival in 2024.

In these ads, glib Gavin absurdly claims that the state he misgoverns — ours — is the nation's real "free" state.

However, according to World Population Review, the truth is the exact opposite: Florida ranks No. 1 as the freest of our nation's 50 states.

And Gavin's state — ours — ranks, well, almost last, at No. 48.

But let's be fair and utilize another resource. The Cato Institute publishes its own "Index of Personal and Economic Freedom." Based on Cato's calculations, Florida is the penultimate freest, behind New Hampshire.

And California? Third from last: No. 48.

Cato accompanies its ranking with this succinct analysis: "California is one of the least free states in the country, largely because of its long-standing poor performance on economic freedom as one of the highest-taxed states in the country."

We know politicians have no shame. But goofy Gavin takes the cake — and, ever maskless, eats it too.

Meantime, the DA he appointed for San Francisco, Chesa Boudin, has been recalled; the DA he appointed for Los Angeles, George Gascon, is about to be recalled — both for rolling out a red carpet to criminals — a definite freedom-inhibitor for law-abiding citizens.

Meantime, California's freeways are the worst in the nation as infrastructure (literally) crumbles. Which means freedom to drive safely is out the window.

Meantime, Gavin hosts half the country's homeless population. There goes freedom to walk safely.

Meantime, California public schools produce the worst test scores in the nation. Freedom from literacy? Makes sense since Hollywood is the dumbing down capital of the U.S.A., making movies that glorify stupidity.

Meantime, though faced with destructive wildfires in drought conditions, Gavin capitulates to radical environmentalists and won't clear highly flammable brush because of the disruption it causes to bugs and birds.

Bottom line: If Pinocchio can't even run one state correctly, how the heck is he supposed to run all 50?

As Fleet Street's John Junor used to say, "Pass the sickbag, Alice."

READERS' RESPONSE TO OUR ITEM ON ALASKA AIRLINES

T.H. wrote: "I pray every time I take off in a plane these days, hoping the mechanic showed up that morning and especially that he was hired for merit instead of equity.

G.F. wrote: "Tragically, the airlines story is very common, just change the names, places, and dates. Along with everything else, it makes one wonder just what the country is coming to."

K.R. (a travel agent) wrote: "This is the truth of what is going on daily with many flights across the country and worldwide. Great article!"

