

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Heredity and Imprisonment

"Searching for My Great-Great-Grandfather and Finding Other Things" was the title of a talk given by Nicholas Daniloff to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute February 18. Daniloff, a former Moscow correspondent for *U.S. News & World Report*, currently is a fellow at the Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. He has previously written a book on the Soviet space effort and is now completing a book on his arrest by the KGB in 1986.

He noted that he began his journalistic assignment in Moscow in 1981 and was supposed to return to the US in 1984, but extended his tour twice to continue researching the life of one of his Russian ancestors. Aleksandr Frolov, his great-great-grandfather, was an early 19th-century radical and Decembrist, or a member of the abortive revolt against Czar Nicholas I which was staged December 14, 1826. During their imprisonment in Siberia, many of the Decembrists made bracelets and rings from their iron shackles. After Daniloff graduated from college in 1956, his father gave him a ring which, according to family legend, Frolov had made from his chains. A few months after he arrived in Moscow he read an article in *Sovetskaia Rossiia* about Decembrist jewelry and arranged a meeting with the author, also a descendent of one of the revolutionaries; eventually the ring's authenticity was verified. This development only piqued Daniloff's curiosity and he intensified the search for Frolov despite the warnings of his chief editor, Marvin Stone, who had told him "never to do anything in Moscow that didn't have to do with journalism."

Moscow's Military Historical Archive contains all the police reports on the Decembrists, Daniloff discovered. He asked to see them and was told he would have to submit the precise catalogue card numbers, but that he would not be allowed inside to look at the catalogue. Through a fortunate coincidence he found the correct numbers and submitted them to the Archive. Eighteen months later he got the okay to look at the material. "I painstakingly, over a few weeks, went through all of these records," he said. He found many

important documents, including the Czarist arrest report containing the 21-year-old radical's description. It turns out that Daniloff and Frolov were physically quite similar, as the reporter was sharply reminded when the KGB was taking down his description.

Arrested in Moscow

Daniloff was picked up by the KGB in retaliation for the FBI's arrest of Soviet spy Gennadi Zakharov on a New York City subway platform. "There have been people who asserted the FBI was out of control when it arrested Zakharov. It ain't true." The FBI got clearance from other agencies for the move, including the State Department. "I believe there was a failure of political oversight" in the arrest of Zakharov so close to a summit, Daniloff said.

After being detained on trumped-up espionage charges, Daniloff was taken to Lefortovo Prison in Moscow. "The first thing done to prisoners is to try to weaken them." He was fed a diet low in calories and protein; his belt, watch and shoelaces were taken; he could only shower once a week and shave twice a week. "You then confront a well-dressed, sweet-smelling interrogator. It is a highly sophisticated system." The man who questioned him, Sergadeev, was "a master of psychology. He did everything he could to manipulate my emotions — to make me break down." After one particular session with Sergadeev, Daniloff was uncertain if he would ever be released. "I thought to myself, my God, if I ever get out of here it will be ten years from now." He was especially afraid of missing a large part of his son's and daughter's lives.

While he was in prison his wife, Ruth, brought him four books of Decembrist memoirs to read. At one point his interrogator let him know he was aware of these books. "Now, Mr. Daniloff," said Sergadeev, "I suppose you are going to go back to your cell and read those Decembrist memoirs." Daniloff said that he could see what had been going on in Sergadeev's mind: "That damn American spy" was going to get out of prison one day, go back to the United States



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and write a book comparing his treatment by the Soviet Union to that of the Decembrists by Czarist Russia. Daniloff added, "And by God, I am going to do that!" When someone in the audience suggested that he send Sergadeev the book, he responded, "I am not going to send him a copy. He's going to pay his hard-earned currency for it."

Direct and Asymmetrical Exchanges

In the past twenty-five years there have been three other cases in which the USSR snatched an American civilian after the US arrested a Soviet spy. In 1963, a Yale professor named Frederick Barghoorn was picked up in Moscow. President John F. Kennedy sent Khrushchev a personal letter on the situation and the Soviet leader ordered Barghoorn released; the spy spent ten years in jail, which greatly upset the Soviets. In 1972, American businessman Paul Sjeklocha was taken into custody in Moscow. A quiet one-for-one exchange followed, setting a precedent which the Soviets wanted to follow in the Daniloff case. In 1978, Jay Crawford of International Harvester Corporation was arrested after the US caught two Soviet spies. Following intense negotiations, all were released into the custody of their ambassadors. Crawford was convicted, but his sentence was suspended and he was subsequently returned to the US; the Soviet agents were sentenced to fifty years. The

USSR was infuriated by this development, and later agreed to release five dissidents in exchange for their two agents. The Soviets did not want to repeat this sort of asymmetrical bargain: "It is clear that Gorbachev was very much against a solution to the Zakharov-Daniloff affair that was anything different from a one-to-one exchange."

While in prison Daniloff told his *U.S. News* editor that he opposed a one-to-one exchange. "I told him it should be asymmetrical and, I believe, it was," because Daniloff was freed outright whereas Zakharov pleaded *nolo contendere* in court and was banished from the US. Also, the Soviets released human rights activist Yuri Orlov and allowed twelve dissidents to receive medical attention in the West. And the Iceland summit went forward, "which, despite its controversial nature, I think was a good thing."

When asked if his and Frolov's hopes for Russia were similar, Daniloff replied, "I thought a lot about Frolov in prison. Russia has a lot of talented people, but Russia seems to murder its talent, to destroy anyone who rises above the mediocrity." He is not optimistic for the future. "I say a prayer for Gorbachev every night because he is really trying to change things. As to whether he will succeed or not, I suppose my Russian pessimism takes over."

Reported by Paul Lerner with assistance from Robert Monyak

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