Spy on a Tightrope

Back in the latter days of the Cold War, the Soviet KGB thought it had a new mole inside the highest ranks of the U.S. Navy. But Thomas Hayden, a double agent, had them outfoxed. What no one counted on was that Hayden would develop moral qualms about his duplicity. By David Wise

The tall, mustached man walking toward Thomas Hayden on the beach south of Rome was wearing red swim trunks, a white baseball cap and a white polo shirt.

It might have seemed an incongruous uniform for Vitaly Yurchenko, the number two KGB official in charge of the Soviet spy agency’s operations in North America. But in his beach gear, Yurchenko blended right in with the other bathers; no one paid any attention to him.

Hayden, a master chief based in the U.S. naval communications center in Naples, did not know the name of the man striding toward him. But he knew he was a high-ranking Russian intelligence officer.

For almost two years, Hayden had been selling U.S. secrets to the KGB. He was told he was being groomed to replace John Walker as Moscow’s spy inside the United States Navy. But all the while, Tom Hayden was working for Uncle Sam. He was a double agent on a high-risk assignment for America, posing as a traitor.

He was a spy on a tightrope. One false move or wrong word might expose him, putting his life in danger.

This, Hayden knew, was the moment of truth. The tall man had flown from Moscow for a personal look at the American spy. Was Hayden for real? The KGB had to know. If the Russians suspected him, anything might happen.

The man was drawing closer. Hayden wished he had brought along his Beretta. There was comfort in a 7.65 millimeter. But his handlers, the counterintelligence agents of the Naval Investigative Service (NIS), forbade it. No gun when you meet the Russians, they ordered; if they find out you’re carrying, they’ll have armed agents all around you. You won’t see them, but they’ll be there. It would increase the possibility of a shoot-out if something went wrong.

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Now the man with the mustache stood face-to-face with Hayden. He stuck out his hand.

"My name is Viktor," he lied.

It was show time.

THE TELEVISION AND radio blared in the second-floor hotel room in Naples, a precaution against electronic eavesdroppers. Tom Hayden was nervous; it was his first operational meeting with the navy's counterintelligence service, the shadowy spies who would assign him to his mission.

NIS, one of the government's dozen intelligence arms, had recruited him a year earlier, in 1982, back in the States. Although it keeps a lower profile than the FBI or the CIA, the NIS (later renamed the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, or NCIS) runs its own counterespionage operations worldwide.

The navy's counterspies were drawn to Hayden's unusual qualifications. Then 39, he had fought as a machine gunner on gunboats in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War. He had parachute, Navy SEAL and weapons training as well as special training in codes, a top secret security clearance and a pilot's license. Above all, as a radioman assigned to NAVCAMSMED, the naval communications center at the NATO base in Naples, he had direct access to secret data about the nuclear-powered attack subs deployed in the Mediterranean, including details of their sonar and missile systems. Cable traffic about U.S. subs everywhere in the world passed through the Naples center, a vital electronic hub for the undersea fleet. Hayden would be tempting live bait to the KGB.

Although on edge when he walked into the hotel room, Hayden was reassured when he met the agent waiting for him. Joe Riccio, wiry and quiet spoken, was a butcher's son from an Italian-American section of Brooklyn who had a master's degree in criminal justice and spoke fluent Italian. By temperament, Riccio was calm and cool, a perfect counterbalance to the more volatile, hard-charging Hayden. He would become one of Hayden's chief handlers.

But first, the counterspies had to be certain about Hayden. He was fingerprinted, palm printed and photographed. He was told to write his complete life history and fill out a lengthy questionnaire that together would serve as the basis for a thorough background check. Every detail of his past would be put under a microscope. He was warned he would be given a lie-detector test at the next meeting. If he passed, he would begin training for his mission.

There was a knock at the door. Hayden hid in the bathroom while the room-service waiter brought dinner. After dinner, Hayden slipped away into the night.

Two months later, in March 1983, Hayden met again with Riccio, who introduced him to Ron Olive, a veteran navy counterspy. An ex-marine, Olive, like Hayden, had fought in Vietnam, where he'd earned a bronze star.

Hayden was subjected to a grueling two-hour lie-detector test. Strapped to the machine, he sweated it out—and passed. Riccio and Olive gave him three telephone numbers and their aliases, which were to be used in any phone conversations. They told Hayden to select
the name of an actor whom he could easily recall as his own alias. He chose Robert Redford.

IN JULY, Hayden and his wife, Gloria, met the two NIS agents at a restaurant on the Via Partenope. Ron Olive briefed Gloria, in very general terms, on the spookily world of counterespionage that her husband had entered. Until then, Hayden had been unable to confide in her.

The following month, Hayden met the two agents again at a fish restaurant. They partially revealed his mission, which they said Washington, at the "highest level," had approved: He would approach a still-undisclosed country and offer to sell classified information for cash.

Hayden's training began. The country he approached might be suspicious and put a tail on him. "I had to learn how to detect and avoid surveillance," he says now. "When I went to meet the NIS agents at a hotel, I would take a cab to the train station, for example, walk inside, come back out and hail a second cab to another location. I would take a third cab to a point about a fifteen-minute walk from the hotel. I would stroll around, checking for surveillance.

"I would never know the room number of the hotel. I was always told to have enough gettoni with me, the tokens that are used in pay phones. Three or four blocks away, I would call the hotel and ask for Joe Russo [Riccio]. I would ask, 'What is the cost of the part you wanted me to buy?' Joe would say something like the cost was twenty-one fifty, and that was the room number. I would check the reflections in store windows to see if there was anyone behind me. Or find a coffee shop, go in and have a cup of coffee. You pick a shop with two exits, you go in and out the other. You had to 'clean' yourself for about two hours. There were also practice drills, an agent would follow me, and I would try to detect him."

Hayden was also trained to pay close attention to his surroundings and to remember every detail. "After a meeting, we would go to dinner," he says. "Just regular conversation, eating, drinking wine. Then we'd get back in the room and they would ask, 'What color jacket did the taxi driver wear? Describe the lady who sat two tables away. What did she look like? What was she wearing? Was the maître d' married? Did he have a wedding ring on?"

Hayden was introduced to a third handler, Brent Barrett, a former police officer from Hampton, Virginia. Now the team was complete. Unknown to the navy, however, Hayden, violating every spy rule in the book, began keeping a diary. It survives as a no-holds-barred, candid account of his clandestine career.

In his diary, Hayden recorded the meeting at the Jolly Hotel in Naples three days before Christmas, when he was finally told his target. As the TV and radio played loudly, Riccio and Barrett revealed to Hayden that he would be "dangled" to the KGB as a disgruntled communications specialist. He was to walk into Intourist, the Soviet travel agency in Rome, and offer to sell the navy's secrets.

Anything might happen, Riccio warned. Hayden wrote in his diary, "Joe said they may be talking to me and suddenly, without warning, jump up and 'grab you by the balls and accuse you of working for the CIA.'"

Hayden was relieved when Riccio said he was speaking metaphorically.

Typically, the KGB, like the CIA, used embassy cover for its officers abroad, spies who posed as diplomats. But some worked in Intourist or other Soviet agencies, or as journalists. While the CIA and military intelligence could often spot which Soviets were actually KGB, they could not always be sure.

"The main purpose of the operation," Joe Riccio recalls, "was to identify Soviet intelligence officers and see what their interests were." If the plan worked, by the questions Hayden's Russian handlers asked him and the documents they asked him to steal, counterintelligence would learn what the Soviets knew and did not know.

Before Hayden approached the KGB, however, he had to be tested in a dress rehearsal. He was instructed to travel to Rome in mid-February 1984 and knock on the door of room 769 of the Cavalieri Hilton. Before going up to the room, Hayden fortified himself with two Bloody Marys at the bar.

A stocky man with a mustache, a neatly trimmed gray beard and glasses answered the door.

"Are you the manager of the Intourist office?" Hayden asked, playing his role as instructed.

"Yes, may I help you?" the man replied. He introduced himself as "Boris" and spoke with a heavy Baltic accent. His real name was Don Kidwell, the counterintelligence officer in the CIA's Rome station. For the next four hours, Kidwell, as Boris, grilled Hayden. Why was he betraying his country?

"Because I'm not being promoted," Hayden replied. "My bosses have the good life, and I want it." What information did he have access to? How much money did he want? Who were the members of his family? Where did he live?

Afterward, Joe Riccio told Hayden he had passed the test. The real thing was set for March 6.

Back in Naples, Hayden was given two classified documents to offer to the KGB. On March 5, Hayden
returned to Rome, checked in to the Hotel Flora on the Via Veneto and began composing his handwritten letter to the Russians: "My name is Thomas Earl Hayden.... Enclosed you will find a piece of information classified CONFIDENTIAL that I stole from my command. I also have another classified SECRET. I stole it, too.... I need money badly." The letter said he would return to the Intourist office two days later with the document marked SECRET and would sell it for $5,000.

At 9 A.M. sharp the next morning, after a half-hour drive, they were inside the Soviet embassy residence in Rome, the Villa Abamelek. With a sinking feeling, Hayden realized he was on Soviet territory. No one could help him now.

as instructed, Hayden was at the door of the Intourist office on the Piazza Buenos Aires. He was buzzed in. A young, dark-haired woman who looked Italian sat behind the counter. He asked for the manager. An older woman emerged from an office to see what the trouble was. To Hayden, she looked like a Russian from central casting: "She was about 50, five-foot and 150 pounds, strongly built, gray hair, very businesslike and with a Slavic accent." Hayden kept insisting on seeing the manager, and the woman finally led him to a back room where the manager, a short, heavy-set older man, received him. Hayden handed him the envelope and said it was urgent that it be passed to a representative of the Soviet government.

Then Hayden left. He checked his watch. Elapsed time: six minutes. He ate breakfast, took a cab to the Vatican, entered St. Peter's and went to confession. "I was baptized a Catholic and still am a Catholic, although not a practicing Catholic. But I was that day," he says.

At the Trevi fountain a few hours later, Hayden threw in a coin. He made a wish for a long life.

The next morning, Hayden had time to kill. "I took a walk in the park near my hotel and went to the Rome zoo," he wrote in his diary. "The zoo depressed me, especially the gorilla, he looked as lonely as me."

That evening, thinking about the morrow, Hayden half hoped the Russians would turn him down. But he knew the KGB might take him somewhere, and he would have to go with them. "I went to bed that night scared," he wrote. "I did not sleep well."

Exactly at 9 A.M., Hayden was back at the Intourist office and was buzzed in again. This time the woman from central casting and the manager greeted him as though he were a long-lost cousin. A door popped open and out walked a man who Hayden knew instantly was KGB. The officer, dressed casually in a brown turtleneck sweater, looked to be in his thirties. He whispered to Hayden to follow him down a winding staircase to a storeroom underneath the offices. Still whispering, the KGB man, who later introduced himself as "Sergio," put a finger to his lips and handed Hayden a typewritten sheet of instructions.

He told him not to be afraid, all was well, but asked him to turn over his military ID, passport, driver's license and the document classified SECRET. The identity papers, he was told, would be copied and returned to him later.

Sergio made the copies on the spot and handed Hayden a gray wig, sunglasses and a brown corduroy hat. Hayden refused the wig but put on the rest of the disguise. He was hustled out the back door and into a white Alfa Romeo. Another car followed them.

After a half-hour drive, they passed through a gate, onto the grounds of a large estate. They were
inside the Soviet-embassy residence in Rome, the Villa Abamelek. With a sinking feeling, Hayden realized he was on Soviet territory. No one could help him now.

They entered a two-story building, and Sergio led him into a well-furnished apartment. There he was greeted by an athletic-looking man of medium build in his mid-thirties, poised, well dressed in a gray suit, blue shirt and striped tie. He ushered Hayden into a living room where a sofa and two comfortable chairs were arranged around a coffee table.

"You may call me Alex," the man said. He ducked into the kitchen and emerged with a plate of salami, crackers, some peanuts, a fifth of Chivas Regal, a bottle of water and two glasses.

For the next six hours, Hayden was interrogated by Alex. The questions were typewritten, and he gave written answers, sometimes adding verbal clarifications. Hayden noticed a large mirror resting on a chair opposite where he sat and wondered if it concealed a camera and a tape recorder.

The KGB man wanted to know exactly what Hayden’s job was at the naval communications center, and the data to which he had access. Hayden had thought he would be questioned about satellites and high-speed computers and was surprised when Alex was more interested in how U.S. and NATO forces would react if tensions in the area increased.

As they talked, Hayden was belting scotch, and Alex matched him, drink for drink. Hayden began to relax a bit. This spy business might not be so bad after all. He glanced out the balcony that overlooked the estate. "It was a nice view," he wrote in his diary, "of trees, fields, and small rolling hills... Had the visit been for a different reason, it would have been very quiet and relaxing."

Hayden had expected the KGB men to be tough and menacing. Instead, he wrote, "Sergio and Alex were genuinely nice. It takes you by complete surprise." But they offered him only $2,000, which he took, signing a receipt.

As he basked in the glow of the Chivas, the salami and the view of the rolling hills, Hayden felt the first pangs of doubt about what he was doing. "The most difficult thing in this whole meeting was for me to see Sergio and Alex as the bad guys," he wrote. "I was taken aback by their courtesy. It was all "a game we were playing. I truly felt that in another situation we could be friends.

"I found myself regretting a world whose condition and differences caused men like myself and Sergio and Alex to have to be involved in this type of work. It was time to go, I put my hat and glasses back on... as I was leaving the building children were playing in a nearby field. There were three of them. A girl about 7 and two boys about 5 or 6. They were Russians, and again I felt bad about what we as adults were doing and the future we were leaving them... This wasn't the KGB I had imagined. They didn't have children in my vision and they were cold, hard men.

"The shocking discovery wasn't that the KGB was like me. The shock was, that I'm like the KGB."

After arranging to meet Alex again in April at a piazza in Rome, Hayden was driven to a taxi stand and let out. He returned to Naples, telephoned Riccio and spoke one word, bingo, the code meaning the operation was a success.

That night he wrote in his diary, "I was too keyed up to sleep very well and couldn't tell Gloria anything. Spying is like jumping out of airplanes. Fear and loneliness, along with tremendous stress. Then, when it's over, and you realize you have survived, unbelievable relief, excitement, exhilaration."

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Hayden met with Riccio, Olive and Barrett to be debriefed. The counterspies were concerned that Hayden felt Alex was a nice guy. "Remember, Tom," Ron Olive cautioned, "they're acting." But the NIS agents continued to worry about Hayden's friendly feelings toward his Soviet handler.

Hayden had to admit to himself that he loved the
excitement of espionage. His adrenaline was pumping as the date for his next meeting with the KGB approached. Spying was like taking drugs, he told his diary: “I find myself wondering how in the world normal people tolerate living their normal lives. I think it would kill me. This might, too...”

On April 7, Hayden caught the early train to Rome. He waited at the appointed spot, carrying a newspaper, as instructed, and four classified documents he had been provided by the NIS. Alex approached from a bus stop and crossed the street.

“Where is the nearest post-office box?” he asked.

“It’s not far; I’ll show you,” Hayden replied. It was the traditional exchange of recognition signals that the Russians call a pant.

They walked to the Villa Borghese, and in the park Hayden handed the Russian the four documents in an envelope tucked inside his newspaper. Alex said he would be back in ten minutes. He might have handed off the envelope to another KGB man. In any event, he returned without the documents. Hayden assumed he followed that procedure so if the Italian police or counterintelligence agents pounced, there would be no incriminating evidence to be seized. They would just be two friends chatting in the park.

Alex said he could not pay until his experts evaluated the documents. Hayden pretended to be indignant, then calmed down. The KGB man pressed him to steal anything he could dealing with the SOSUS antisubmarine system, sonar, the Harpoon missiles aboard the fast-attack subs, codes and cryptography.

Hayden explained that tight security at the communications center made it difficult to steal or copy documents or to get them out of the building. The sentry was authorized to conduct random searches of people leaving and to use “deadly force” if necessary.

“This isn’t like a public library, where you just check the fucking things out,” he said.

Early in May, Hayden rendezvoused with his NIS handlers at the Sheraton in Rome. He was shown a sheaf of photographs of Soviet embassy and consular officials in Italy. He immediately picked out Alex’s photo.

Alex was using a short form of his true first name. He was Aleksandr Mikhailovich Chepil, a KGB officer listed as “third secretary, consul” at the Soviet embassy in Rome. Born in a rural village in the Ukraine, he was then 36. He had arrived on October 22, 1985, with his wife, Ludmila, on his first tour abroad. The couple had two children, a son, 15, and a daughter, 8.

Although Hayden had identified the KGB man from his photograph, he was not told Alex’s true name, lest he inadvertently let it slip and give the game away.

“I know that if I truly fool Alex, his future is going to become dim... His superiors will come down hard on him and he’ll pay a heavy price. I feel bad about that because I believe that in different circumstances we could be friends.”

After fingering Alex, Hayden caught the train to Naples. More doubts crowded his mind. He had studied the photographs not only of the Soviets in Italy but of their wives and children. That night he recorded his qualms in his secret diary: “I have no doubt that Alex, Sergio and the others are basically decent human beings who have families no different than mine. They are doing what they think is right, just like me... I can’t tell the good guys from the bad guys.”

Seeing the photographs of the Russian wives and children made him uneasy because “it reminds me of how hosed up the world really is. The image of the spy game from the outside looking in is an image of intrigue, excitement, adventure... On the inside you see the futility of it all.”

At his next meeting with Alex, in Sabaudia, a coastal town south of Rome, the KGB man gave Hayden another $2,000 but pressed him to steal top secret documents. The risk, Alex pointed out, would be the same as if Hayden walked out with less important material.

“The problem is getting it out without being caught,” Hayden countered.

The Russian sounded sympathetic. “It’s even more difficult to rob a bank from the inside,” he agreed.

In July they met again in Sabaudia. Alex cowered up in a white Alfa Romeo with the license plate 26083A. Hayden knew he should report the license number to the NIS but didn’t dare risk writing it down. Then he remembered that the clock in his Lancia was broken; he set the minute hand at twenty-six and the hour at eight. That way, all he had to remember was “26A.”

On the beach, Hayden handed Alex a 200-page publication listing the call sign of every ship in the U.S. Navy. He asked the Russian for $25,000. While Alex disappeared for a time, as usual, Hayden sat on the beach watching a well-endowed young woman in a bikini bottom and no top. There was a tree line on the ridge behind the beach, and it occurred to Hayden that if the KGB wanted to kill him, it would be an easy shot for a man in the trees with a rifle. Maybe if that happened, he daydreamed, the topless girl would come over and hold his head against her chest. What a way to go he thought.

He was jolted back to reality when Alex returned. They promptly got into an argument over money. Hayden complained he wasn’t being paid enough for the risks he was taking.

Hayden continued to be troubled by the human factor. He was wrestling with a moral dilemma. As he wrote in his diary, “I know that if I truly fool Alex and he in turn keeps being taken in that his future is going to become dim... His superiors will come down hard
on him and he'll pay a heavy price. I feel bad about that because I believe that in different circumstances we could be friends. I believe he's a nice guy.”

When Hayden met with his NIS handlers, he voiced his concern about Alex. Brent Barrett said they understood. But Barrett, Hayden wrote in his diary, added, “Even if we asked you to hit him (kill him), and we won’t, it would be very personal and hard to do, but it would be necessary.” I said, ‘I know,’ then I said, ‘I’ll do my job, no matter what I feel.’”

Years before, Hayden had dropped out of Navy SEAL training when he was sent home on emergency leave after his mother died. He later bitterly regretted his decision to leave the program and made a vow: “Never again would I fail to see something through.”

Hayden met Alex on the beach again in August, and the KGB man gave him just $1,500. The $15,000 Hayden had asked for the ship call signs was way out of line, Alex said; his people concluded the document was not that good.

“If I brought a Harpoon missile to you, your people would say that it wasn’t interesting,” Hayden complained.

“They don’t trust me,” Alex said cryptically. It was hard to read the remark; perhaps Chepil, on his first assignment abroad, was having trouble convincing Moscow that Hayden was a valuable recruitment.

As they got ready to leave, Hayden asked the Russian if he’d like to have a beer. Alex hesitated, seemed about to say yes, but decided he did not know a “safe place” to go. Then, to keep Hayden on the hook, he dangled the possibility of paying as much as $200,000 for the right documents. “The money is here,” Alex said, “I’m sure of it.”

When Hayden reported back to his navy handlers, he was told that KGB officers who were deceived by a double agent fell under a cloud that sometimes impels them to defect. And this, the agents noted, was Alex’s first spy assignment out of Moscow.

“Wow,” Hayden said, “first time on the track and you get fucked to death—that’s too bad.”

En route to the next meeting in October, again in Sabaudia, Hayden did a double take when he passed a couple having sex on the hood of a car in broad daylight. Since he had been carefully trained to observe and remember everything, that nugget duly made its way into a classified NIS report.

Alex led Hayden into thick woods outside the town. Hayden was nervous about the location and wondered if he was being set up to be killed. He picked up a large stick but realized it would do him little good against a gun. If they used a silencer, no one would hear.

He put his fears aside and played his role. “All I’m getting is peanuts,” Hayden protested.

Alex looked confused. Peanuts? Hayden explained that meant next to worthless.

“All I get is bullshit,” Hayden continued.

“What means bullshit?” Alex asked.

“Do you understand cow dung?” The Russian nodded.

“That’s what I get, cow dung.” At that, they both laughed.

The KGB man said their next meeting place would be a tram station in the Trastevere section of Rome in December. In the meantime, Hayden was to write a detailed description of his command, especially what codes and cryptographic equipment were used.

As Hayden prepared for the meet, he wondered whether his own people were using him as a pawn in some larger espionage chess match. “There is absolutely no trust in this game, even among your friends,” he wrote. “They could be selling me out or I could just as easily sell them out. There’s a great deal of money out there available to each of us.... It’s possible to get away with it.” But if he ever acted on these fantasies and really betrayed his country, he wrote, “I would never be able to see myself in a mirror again.”

Hayden’s navy handlers told him to try, delicately, to explore whether Alex might be interested in changing sides. Chepil’s “They don’t trust me” comment had intrigued American intelligence. There was another, smaller change in Hayden’s mission, which he recorded in his diary: “I have a new cover name. I am no longer Robert Redford, I am now Pete Rose.”

Alex was waiting at the tram station in December. He gave Hayden $5,000 this time but questioned him closely on which copying machines he had used. It was
obvious to Hayden that the KGB had studied the documents and figured out they'd been copied on more than one machine. Some of the copies had in fact been made at the NIS by Joe Riccio, wearing rubber gloves to leave no prints, and others by Hayden at his office. Although nervous by this line of questioning, he was able to double-talk his way out of it.

To Hayden's surprise, at the end of the meeting Alex offered to join him for a beer. "I thought you would never ask," Hayden said. They found a restaurant nearby and had lunch and two beers apiece.

On the train ride back to Naples, Hayden thought about how difficult it was to play his part, to deceive this man. "Would he kill me, would I kill him?" he later asked his diary. "The difference between me and the NIS agents who control me is that they deal with the Alex on paper, I deal with Alex, the man, the husband, the father, the human, and I like him."

Hayden's home life had begun to suffer from his secret work. His teenage son, Lance, was starting to ask questions. "I came home after one of these meetings with Alex," Hayden recalls, "and it was like three o'clock in the morning, and Lance was sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me. 'What you doing?' 'Working.' 'You're not. Nobody in your position works these hours.' He kept quizzes me, and I said, 'You're going to have to trust me.' He just asked me one more question. 'Does Mom know what you're doing?' And I said, 'yes.' He knew I was up to something. And I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking I'm out chasing women."

But it wasn't just Lance. Hayden's relations with his wife were deteriorating. "I don't know why or what it is about this activity, but Gloria and I get at each other's throat just about every time I have to make a meet," he confided to his diary. "I admit I am not the most tender person who has ever walked around on two legs. I will also admit that women and their feelings and emotions utterly confuse me most of the time. But this is what I do. I'm going to continue to do it.... I wish she would just accept it and make things easier on both of us.... I don't know what to do about it but I know that I'm not giving this up. Before I do that I'll leave her. I don't want to do that either, but I will."

Hayden was sweating, increasingly nervous as the interrogation continued. What if he had been discovered? Perhaps the KGB had tapped his telephone or, despite all his precautions, seen him with the NIS agents.

IT WAS ALMOST spring in Rome when Hayden next met Alex in early March 1985. They walked into the Villa Glori park, and Hayden turned over several documents, including a NATO publication classified SECRET. "If your experts don't think it's important," he emphasized, "they have their heads up their ass." Alex looked puzzled, so Hayden pointed to his head, then to his butt, and with a graphic motion indicated his meaning. Now Alex got it and chuckled.

The KGB man displayed a tiny camera but said since it was disguised as a pack of cigarettes and Hayden did not smoke, he could not give it to him. Perhaps Hayden could think of some other object it could be disguised as, something he normally carried.

As they walked in a park in Rome at their next meeting in late April, Alex asked if Hayden thought he could place a KGB bug in the computer room. Hayden said he would try.

He was due at a debriefing in Positano the next day. When he got back to Naples, he rushed home, said good-bye to his two sons and with Gloria drove down the Amalfi coast, arriving near midnight. Even at night, the hotel had a spectacular view. The stars were out. He later recorded the moment in his diary: "I drank four beers, stood out on the patio, while Gloria went to bed and thought about all I had been through in my life and wondered at how I became a spy. Life is truly amazing!"

THERE WAS NOTHING in his early years to suggest that Thomas Hayden would end up in a dangerous, clandestine game with the Russians. He was born in Evansville, Indiana, a year after Pearl Harbor; his father was a blue-collar worker in a shipping terminal on the Ohio River. His parents divorced when he was 4. He and an older sister ended up in foster homes. A rebellious teenager, he ran away several times: "The social workers did not know what to do with me." Five days after his seventeenth birthday, he enlisted in the navy. He later graduated from college while stationed in San Diego.

During the Cuban missile crisis, he served aboard a destroyer, the USS Charles S. Sperry, in the Caribbean. "We intercepted Soviet shipping and surfaced a Russian sub," he says.

In 1965, while based in Norfolk, Virginia, he visited Pennsylvania on a weekend leave and met Gloria Pheasant, who worked as a secretary in the state government. He drove her back to Harrisburg. They dated, and were married a year later.

Combat in Vietnam followed in the early 1970s. Hayden rose steadily through the enlisted ranks, won medals and arrived in Naples with his wife and two sons in August 1982. Two years later, while in Italy, he was promoted to master chief. By then he was serving in his dual role as watch officer in the communications center and secret counterspy for his country.

AT THE DEBRIEFING in Positano, Hayden was surprised to learn that he and Alex had starred in a film,
covertly shot by the NIS and the CIA during their meeting in the park in Rome the day before.

One month later, on May 30, former chief warrant officer John A. Walker Jr. was arrested by the FBI near Washington. For eighteen years, he'd sold the navy's codes and other secrets to the KGB as head of a family spy ring that included his son, his brother, and a friend. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

Three weeks later, Hayden met Alex on the beach again at Sabaudia. The KGB man had rented two chairs and an umbrella. Hayden told Alex he was scared by Walker's arrest. Would the Soviets help him escape to another country if the FBI closed in?

"Yes, sure," Alex replied. "Walker was careless and dumb. His wife turned him in. Why did his wife even know? Does your wife know?" Hayden assured Alex that Gloria knew nothing. They agreed to meet again near the beach in late July.

The morning of July 28, Hayden drove up to the beach from Naples in a rented red Fiat. He spotted Alex, who said he had a "colleague" who wanted to meet him.

It was then that the tall man with the mustache came walking toward them.

After shaking hands with Hayden, Vitaly Yurchenko, who had just flown in from Moscow, exchanged some quick words in Russian with Alex. "There are too many people here," Yurchenko explained to Hayden in English. He indicated they would meet in the woods behind the beach.

Alex and Hayden went first, and a few moments later Yurchenko joined them. He carried two folding chairs and an Italian shopping bag. They walked even deeper into the woods, into a completely secluded area.

It was clear that Yurchenko was in charge. He sent Alex off to retrieve the rest of their things from the beach. While Alex was gone, Yurchenko began questioning Hayden in a stern manner. Hayden had told Alex he would soon be transferred to Washington, and Yurchenko demanded to know exactly where the command was located.

"Is it at the Pentagon? Is it in Maryland? Is it in Virginia? What street is it on? What's it near? I'm very familiar with Washington; where is it close to?" After the interrogation went on this way for several minutes, Alex returned, carrying another chair, several bags and an ice chest. He was sweating and stopped to take a rest before making a second trip to the beach.

Hayden was sweating, too, but for different reasons. He was increasingly nervous as the interrogation continued. What if he had been discovered? Perhaps the KGB had tapped his telephone or, despite all his precautions, seen him with the NIS agents. This new Russian looked tough.

Hayden noticed that the tips of the ring and middle fingers of his right hand were missing.

"Do you know what a voice polygraph is?" Yurchenko asked.

When Hayden said no, Yurchenko claimed that the KGB technicians could run a tape through a machine that would tell whether the person recorded was lying. "Would you mind being voice polygraphed?" With little choice, Hayden agreed. Yurchenko reached into his shopping bag and did something, or pretended to.

With the supposed "voice polygraph" tape running, Yurchenko questioned him closely about security arrangements at the communications center. At the same time, the two Russians were plying him with Czech beer. Hayden was not allowed to have an empty glass; as soon as it was empty, it was refilled.

Hayden again said he was scared by Walker's arrest.

Walker thought he was James Bond, Yurchenko said. "Very unprofessional." And he reminded Hayden it took twenty years to catch Walker. Still, Yurchenko said, perhaps Hayden and Alex should not meet for several months, until the Walker case blew over. They set a date of October 26 in Sabaudia.

They turned to the subject of the bug he had discussed with Hayden. Yurchenko said his specialists had decided the bug should be placed in the code room, rather than the computer room. In October or November, he said, he would introduce Hayden to an electronics expert who would help him plan exactly where to plant it.

It was time to go. Yurchenko looked Hayden in the eye. "Tom, you are very clever, and I admire your bravery and courage."

Hayden wondered if Yurchenko was offering praise or hinting he was onto him.

That night he wrote in his secret diary: "Something new has entered the game and the direction that this now takes me is somewhat frightening."

It was to be his last meeting with the KGB.

Three days later, on August 1, Vitaly Yurchenko told his colleagues in the Soviet embassy in Rome that he was going to visit the Vatican museum. Instead, he went to a pay
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phone across the street from the American embassy on the Via Veneto, called the switchboard and asked to defect. He was told to come right in.

Yurchenko was the highest-ranking KGB officer ever to defect to the CIA. The CIA officer who questioned him noticed that he was missing the tips of the two middle fingers of his right hand.

When a defector walks into the CIA, one of the first questions he’s asked is whether he knows of any KGB moles inside the American government. Yurchenko immediately named Tom Hayden.

Although Hayden was selling secrets to the KGB, Yurchenko said, he was a good man.

"Please don’t shoot him," Yurchenko pleaded.

Whisked back to a safe house in northern Virginia by the CIA, he also provided information that led the FBI to Edward Lee Howard, a former CIA officer who sold secrets to the KGB and escaped to Moscow, and to Ronald Pelton, an ex-National Security Agency official, who was later arrested and is serving a life sentence.

When Yurchenko defected, the KGB had to assume he would identify Hayden as a Soviet source. But nothing happened to Tom Hayden. There was no news story reporting he was arrested, no television footage of Hayden in handcuffs, and in fact his name never surfaced—until this article. As a result, after Yurchenko defected, the KGB would have concluded that Hayden was almost certainly a double agent.

Three months later, Yurchenko walked away from his CIA watchdog in a Georgetown restaurant, made his way to the new Soviet embassy in Washington and redeployed to Moscow.

When Hayden got the news, he wrote in his diary: "That fucking Victor did a Flip-Flop!"

Most U.S. intelligence analysts think Yurchenko was a genuine defector who became disenchanted and went home to Russia. Some remain skeptical and believe he was sent to penetrate or confuse the CIA.

Vitaly Yurchenko.

The CIA’s Don Kidwell, who babysat Yurchenko on the flight from Rome to the safe house in Virginia, had no doubt that the KGB saw Hayden as their replacement for the Walker-family spy ring, which had betrayed the navy’s codes. The key piece of evidence, Kidwell said, is “the fact that they wanted him to bug the code room.”

One of Yurchenko’s questioners in Virginia was Aldrich Ames, the KGB mole inside the CIA, who reported back to Moscow everything that Yurchenko was telling the agency. Ames says he believes that Yurchenko’s decision to defect “was an impulsive one.”

From his prison cell in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, where Ames is serving a life sentence for espionage, he replied to questions from the author: “I don’t think he [Yurchenko] decided to defect until after he was told to go to Rome.”

In this wilderness of mirrors, one fact was plain: Hayden’s operation was over. Yurchenko had changed the script forever.

“I feel bad for Alex,” Hayden told his diary. “He must be going through a terrible strain now.... We were the same, he and I. We were just on opposite sides....” Reflecting on his own career as a spy, Hayden wrote, “I think to play this game you have to be a little crazy.”

At last, Hayden could tell the full truth to his family. They were moved out of Naples to Washington. The NIS agents took Hayden to dinner in Georgetown—they deliberately chose the restaurant Yurchenko had walked away from. Joe Hefferson, a senior NIS official, congratulated Hayden, who wrote in his diary, “Joe told me at dinner that President Reagan had received a full briefing on this and that he knew my name. Aint that a trip!!”

On October 22, 1985, in a secret ceremony, Rear Admiral Cathal Flynn, the commander of the NIS, presented Hayden with the Legion of Merit as his proud family looked on. “I want to thank you on behalf of a grateful navy and a grateful nation,” Flynn said.

Hayden retired from the navy in 1988, after twenty-nine years. He worked as a civilian pilot for a time, then in law enforcement in a western state. His marriage to Gloria ended in 1997. His undercover work had played a part in their problems.

But Hayden has no regrets about his life as a spy. “I’d like to meet Alex someday,” he says. “I want him to know that I was like he was, loyal to my country. That I wasn’t a moneygrubbing traitor. Maybe we would even have another beer.”

David Wise is the author of Cassidy’s Run: The Secret Spy War Over Nerve Gas.