

SPY SECRETS UNRAVEL FOR MILITARY RETIREE

June 21, 2000 | The Orlando Sentinel

By Jim Leusner

TAMPA -- It was 1969, the height of the Cold War, and George Trofimoff had just been promoted to head the U.S. Army section of a NATO intelligence center in Nuremberg, West Germany.

Short on cash, he borrowed money from a boyhood friend -- a Russian Orthodox priest who, like him, had been born of Russian immigrant parents in Germany. Then the priest began asking questions about the Army's 66th Military Intelligence Group.

"You don't need to pay me back," said the priest, who became an archbishop. "And there's lots more money where that came from."

It was classic recruitment by the KGB, the former Soviet spy agency.

So began a 25-year spying career for Trofimoff, a 73-year-old retired Army Reserve colonel and former Army civilian intelligence analyst who made his home at a Brevard County military retiree community in Viera for the past five years. He was arrested last Wednesday at the Tampa Airport Hilton Hotel after a meeting to pick up \$30,000 from undercover FBI agents posing as Russian intelligence agents.

At a bail hearing in Tampa, Assistant U.S. Attorney Terry Furr spent 50 minutes detailing the espionage career and activities of Trofimoff -- the highest-ranking American military officer ever charged with spying.

"This individual was responsible for a huge hemorrhage of information that had come out," Furr told U.S. Magistrate Mark Pizzo, reading sample titles of 70 telephone-book-thick reports he said Trofimoff passed on such subjects as Eastern Bloc chemical weapons, battle strategies and NATO intelligence needs.

"There's no telling how many documents went over."

Furr referred to Trofimoff's activities as "a 25-year crime" motivated by \$300,000 in payments and loyalty to an enemy country he referred to as the "Motherland."

"Russia is my homeland," he told an undercover FBI agent last year in a phone call, Furr recounted. In another videotaped meeting with an agent, he pounded his chest above his heart to explain why he spied: "I'm not American in here."

But Trofimoff's court-appointed lawyer, Daniel Hernandez of Tampa, countered that his client -- naturalized as a citizen in 1951 -- is an old man who has suffered a mini-stroke and would not flee if released. Hernandez said Trofimoff, who maintains his innocence, would pledge his \$235,000 home, \$21,000 in cash and bank accounts from a daughter and \$48,500 in cash pledged by neighbors to help with bail.

But Furr warned that Trofimoff, whom he said is active and likes to play tennis, could flee to a Russian embassy and be aided by the KGB -- now called the SVRR. He also said Trofimoff lied to FBI agents after his arrest.

Pizzo detained Trofimoff until trial. He could receive up to life in prison if convicted.

"Mr. Trofimoff wants the court to be well aware that he fought communism for many, many years," Hernandez said after the ruling. "Russia is not his country, America is."

Throughout the 90-minute hearing, Trofimoff sat with a pained face, nervous hands and chains shackling his ankles beneath an orange Hillsborough County Jail jumpsuit. He was teary-eyed as he shuffled into court, nearly crying when he saw his German wife, Jutta, sitting in the packed courtroom audience.

Trofimoff and the priest he considered his brother, Igor Vladimirovich Susemihl, were identified with the help of Vasili Mitrokhin, a KGB agent and archivist who retired in 1984. He defected to the British in 1992 with six suitcases of handwritten notes he made from reviewing agency files dating to the 1920s.

German authorities arrested both men on espionage charges in December 1994, but the charges were dropped because of statute of limitations problems there. Susemihl died last year.

Trofimoff retired and moved to an upscale military retirement community near Melbourne, where, according to court records, he lives on \$5,300 in monthly military and civilian pensions from the Army and Defense Department and \$350 in Social Security. He also worked part-time as a Publix supermarket bagger while living with his fifth wife.

Though his spying career apparently ended in 1995, Trofimoff received a letter in July 1997 in not-so-cryptic language. The letter, which he thought was from old friends, said: "There was a problem. Please call."

It was part of a classic "false flag" sting operation by Russian-speaking FBI agents, aided by espionage laws with no statute of limitations.

In a series of letters, phone calls and hotel room meetings, Trofimoff was warned of a potential KGB defector and asked for help in reconstructing missing and fragmented Russian files. He agreed and detailed the names of his contacts, identified documents he passed and bragged about receiving the Order of the Red Banner, a top Soviet medal that he said was kept for him in Moscow.

In a six-hour videotaped meeting with agents at a Melbourne hotel in February 1999, Trofimoff told how he would take hundreds of pages of documents home on a Friday night, take pictures of them with a tiny Minox or double-frame camera in his basement and return them on Monday. He passed documents to the priest or KGB agents in Austria.

During one meeting in which undercover agents showed Trofimoff titles of documents he passed, Furr said, he became angry and initially did not want to answer.

"You're putting my head in a noose by making me answer this stuff," Trofimoff said at one point, wrapping his hands around his own neck. "You're cutting my throat."

"But," Furr said, "he identified the documents."