

The Defector

by Brian Freemantle, 1936–

Published: 1990
in »The Factory« no. 2



Jane Snelgrove didn't like defector debriefings. During the time she had worked at the Factory, almost five years now since leaving university, she had conducted four and not been completely happy with any of them. The greatest danger was that the person pleading asylum might not be a genuine defector at all, but a plant by the KGB or some other hostile intelligence organization, to mislead and misinform and by so doing create chaos within the British service. Even when they were genuine, as those she had already vetted appeared to be, there was always some misinformation because invariably they exaggerated what they had to tell, to make themselves seem more important and guarantee their acceptance. Which meant the interrogations were always frustrating and time-consuming, sorting out the truths from the half truths.

There were small compensations, Jane reflected as she drove south through the Sussex countryside on a perfect spring morning. A debriefing at least got her out of London: defectors were never interviewed at the Factory. Always the sessions

were conducted at a safe house far away from the London intelligence headquarters, a precaution against the asylum-seeker being a decoy actually sent to identify the Factory's location. Today the debriefing was to be at Pulborough, at a vast country mansion she had not been to before. Set in fifteen acres of its own walled grounds, it was easy to patrol with dogs and guards. Additionally the grounds were seeded with electronic sensor devices and body-heat-seeking cameras.

The gated entry from the road, which was visible to passing motorists, was monitored by only one man. Later, about fifty yards up the winding drive and out of public view, the real checks were made. There, at a proper guardhouse, all her security passes were scrutinized and verified. While Jane, who was blonde and statuesque, with the body of the athlete she had been at university, sat patiently at the wheel of her open-topped sports car she knew a television camera was upon her, comparing her features with photographs from Records.

It was thirty minutes before she was passed through to continue up the drive. Through the trees lining the drive she saw three separate guard squads. Two were accompanied by alsatians which barked and pulled at their leashes when they saw her, and Jane was glad they were chained to their handlers. She was nervous of dogs, particularly those trained to attack.

The house came into view at last, a square Georgian building the front of which was almost completely covered with ivy and creeper trained by attentive gardeners over the years. There had clearly been a warning of her approach from the guard post because as she swung the car around the gravelled forecourt the impressive oak doors opened and an upright, purposeful-looking man marched out. From her instruction interview with the Director General, Jane knew the man's name was Hendrix. He was a former army major now in charge of the Pulborough house. When he came close Jane saw that the left side of his face was badly scarred from some long-ago injury and his left eye was milky white in its blindness.

They shook hands and Hendrix said he was pleased to meet her and Jane declined the coffee he offered. She had a tendency towards impatience and was anxious to start work at once, without any social distractions.

'What's he like?'

Hendrix shrugged. 'Nervous, of course. But handling it well. Actually I think there's quite a lot of conceit. He treats everyone like a servant, always telling, never asking.'

'Anyone talked to him at length?'

The ex-soldier frowned. 'That's your job, isn't it?'

'I meant has he wanted to talk to anyone? They often do, in their nervousness.'

'Not this one,' said Hendrix positively.

'Have you told him I'm coming?'

Hendrix smiled, stopping in the massive hallway and gesturing towards a set of double doors leading into a drawing room. 'Just that someone was on their way from London. He's waiting for you in there.'

Anatoli Vasilevich Sharov was sitting in an armchair bordering a large fireplace in which a fire was laid but unlit. He appeared quite relaxed, legs splayed out before him. He was a huge, bull-chested man with a profusion of black hair. He looked up curiously when Jane entered, but did not stand.

'Yes?' he said. There was an arrogance in his voice.

'You were told I was coming, weren't you?' said Jane. It was important, in this sort of interview, always to remain the one controlling the encounter. She spoke Russian.

'You're to be my debriefer!' The arrogance changed to surprise. He'd instinctively responded in his own language.

'Is something wrong?'

'You're a woman!'

'So!' Jane took the chair on the other side of the fireplace.

'I was expecting a man: someone of authority.'

Jane leaned towards the man. 'Anatoli Vasilevich,' she said warningly, 'mine is the authority to determine whether you remain in this country. Or, alternatively, whether you are returned to the Soviet Union as someone to whom we decide not to offer sanctuary.'

The huge man blinked at the threat, colouring slightly. 'You make it sound as if there is a choice.'

'There is,' insisted Jane. She guessed this was going to be her most difficult defector debriefing yet.

'Do you know who I am?' demanded the man pompously.

'Why don't you tell me?' invited Jane. It would be wrong for her to become annoyed by his attitude: she always had to remain calm as well as in control.

The man straightened slightly in his chair, as if he were trying to increase his stature. 'I am Anatoli Vasilevich Sharov,' he announced. 'My rank in the KGB is colonel. For two years I have been the rezident in charge of the Soviet intelligence-gathering apparatus at the Russian embassy in England. Before that I was in charge in Paris. I have also worked in the Moscow headquarters of the KGB's First Chief Directorate. My knowledge is very wide.'

Jane nodded but avoided appearing impressed. 'What are you prepared to tell us?'

'Everything,' replied the man shortly.

If Sharov were telling the truth his knowledge was considerable. She said: 'You are married?'

Sharov appeared to sag slightly, losing some of his confidence. 'Yes.'

'What about children?'

'A boy, nine.'

'In Moscow?'

'Yes.'

'Have you thought of what might happen to him and his mother because of what you have done?'

'Under Gorbachev things have changed in Russia.'

'So you don't think they'll be punished?'

'No.'

'Why so sure?'

Sharov shrugged. 'I am, that's all.'

'That doesn't seem to be a very satisfactory answer,' challenged Jane.

The man gave another shrug. 'I have a friend,' he said awkwardly.

'A woman?'

The man nodded. 'Olga Zarya. She is a translator at the Soviet Trade Mission at Highgate.'

'So you have abandoned your wife and child for her?'

'What gives you the right to criticize?' demanded the man angrily.

'I am not criticizing,' refuted Jane. 'I am asking.'

'My wife and I were practically apart before I was posted here. Before I met Olga.'

'So why didn't you divorce your wife and marry Olga?'

'I was to be recalled to Moscow,' disclosed Sharov. 'Olga has another three years in London, at least. I did not want that sort of separation.'

'What about her?' questioned Jane. 'Did she know you intended to defect?'

'We spoke about it, generally.'

'And?'

'You people will have to contact her. Bring her across to me.'

'Why didn't she run at the same time as you?'

'She has a husband. She wasn't as positive as I was.'

It was becoming messy, thought Jane, who was absolutely dedicated to her job in intelligence, had no serious boyfriends and could not imagine anyone, male or female, making for love the sort of sacrifices Sharov appeared to be making. She attacked again: 'Why have you defected, Anatoli Vasilevich?'

'I've told you.'

'No you haven't,' retorted Jane at once.

'I did not want to return to Moscow without Olga. It's as simple as that.'

'Is it as simple as that?' queried Jane. 'Isn't your coming across to us something a little different than that? Isn't it your way of forcing Olga to make a choice between you and her husband?'

There was the familiar shrug. 'What does it matter to you, whichever way it is? I've told you, I am prepared to cooperate in every way possible. I get Olga: you get your information.'

'Providing we make contact with Olga Zarya and persuade her to join you?'

'Is that such a bad deal for you?' asked the man, answering a question with a question.

'What if Olga refuses?'

The arrogance returned. 'She won't, not when she realizes I was serious; that I meant everything I said.'

'Would Olga cooperate? Tell us everything she knows?'

'I guess so.'

'You didn't actually discuss that with her?'

'Not in detail, no.'

'What were you going back to Moscow to do?'

'Headquarters duty again.'

'How did you feel about that?'

The shoulders rose and fell. 'It would have been all right, I suppose. I prefer the West.'

'Where do you want to settle eventually—England? Or America maybe?'

'I haven't thought that far ahead.'

'You don't seem to have thought anything through very far ahead, do you, Anatoli Vasilevich?'

'Enough,' insisted the man.

'How can we identify the woman?'

Sharov smiled, imagining agreement from Jane to do what he asked in approaching his mistress. He hurried from his pocket a bent and cracked photograph of a dark-haired, vaguely smiling woman. It had been taken on a country outing: a rug and picnic things were in the background. He said: 'Tell her Anatoli wants her. That's how I warned her the approach would be made: Anatoli wants you.'

Jane pocketed the picture and said: 'How old is she?'

'Thirty-five,' said Sharov at once.

'What about you? How old are you?'

Sharov frowned. 'Thirty-one.'

'Sufficient for today!' announced Jane, abruptly standing.

'You'll get to her straight away?'

Jane turned back at the door. 'No,' she said positively. 'Not straight away: there are other things to be done first.'

Samuel Bell had controlled his drinking the previous evening and was proud of having done so. It had been his night for staying at Ann's apartment. He'd had only one whisky before they'd left for the theatre, another before dinner, and a single bottle of wine with the meal and no brandy to follow. Ann hadn't said anything but Bell knew his mistress was grateful: more grateful than his wife would have been. That morning he'd studied himself intently in the shaving mirror, looking for signs. There were a few tiny blood vessels broken in his nose but apart from that there was no facial indication that he drank too much. Maybe he'd try to cut it down a little: he certainly felt better for the previous night's abstinence.

He'd left a message at the security check on the Factory's first floor, so Jane was shown directly up to his office. He sat her down, ordered tea and listened without interruption as she went through the initial debriefing in detail. When she finished at last Bell said: 'Well?'

'I don't know what to think,' she said doubtfully. 'On the one hand, if Sharov is who he says he is, he's a pretty incredible catch. But there's a lot I find unsatisfactory.' She moved her hands, as if feeling for the explanation. 'He claims to have the rank of colonel, yet he's only thirty-one. That's too young, unless he's an exceptional intelligence officer. He claims to head the espionage services at the Russian embassy here in London, but there are two problems. Our counter-intelligence say Vladimir Panchenko is the resident in charge. And Sharov couldn't head the entire espionage apparatus. He's KGB. We know there is also a contingent of military intelligence officers from the GRU. The two services work in competition: certainly no KGB man would be in charge of a group of GRU officers. So that's a direct lie. And there's his supposed recall itself. If Sharov were being replaced, for a new head of station, Moscow would have had to file application for a visa, for another Russian to come as a supposed diplomat. I've checked with the Foreign Office. There's been no application.'

‘It might just be that he’s trying to sound more important, like they normally do.’ He was very disappointed at not hearing more: there was one piece of information he was desperate to learn.

‘It’s too much of an exaggeration,’ argued Jane.

‘You talked at length of his arrogant conceit,’ reminded the Director General.

‘I’m even uncomfortable about that,’ said Jane. ‘He hasn’t—or isn’t—taking enough care. Whenever something difficult is pointed out, he just says it’ll work, in his favour, as if nothing can go wrong for him.’

‘Sure you’re not letting yourself get upset by his demeanour?’

‘No,’ said Jane positively. ‘I wouldn’t let that happen.’

‘So you don’t think he’s genuine?’

‘I need to be further convinced,’ qualified Jane.

‘Let’s say he is a plant,’ offered Bell. ‘What’s he trying to achieve?’

‘How about identification of some of our people?’ suggested Jane. ‘There would have to be two people, possibly more, in any approach to the woman, Olga Zarya. What if she’s prepared, expecting it? She could lead us along, while they identify as many of our approaching officers as they can, and then refuse to come over. And when Sharov—who, of course, would be part of the plan—is told his mistress won’t run with him then he changes his mind and goes back to Russia. The result? The Russians lose nothing and we have fed them our people to move against when and how they like.’

‘It’s complicated but it’s a feasible assumption,’ agreed the Director General. He had waited long enough for Jane to offer the information he’d fervently hoped the Russian would provide, but it hadn’t come. ‘Did he say anything to prove how valuable he could be, if we accepted him?’

The girl shook her head. ‘I’ve told you everything.’

Damn! thought Bell, who was absolutely convinced that there was a traitor within the Factory. He’d regarded the defection of Anatoli Sharov as the best opportunity yet to uncover whoever it was. Sharov would know that the greatest terror of any intelligence agency is to have someone infiltrate from the other side: there would have been no more convincing way of showing his worth to the British than by passing on an identity. And if Sharov had been head of station, he would have had to know of such a mole. Bell wondered if he could be wrong about there being a traitor at all, as he’d already been disastrously wrong in trying personally to resolve the suspicion instead of calling in outside investigators. Or was Jane Snelgrove correct in doubting Sharov? Bell bitterly regretted that his position as Director General precluded his interrogating the Russian, but objectively accepted that the security risk was too great. Unthinkable in fact. He couldn’t, either, openly brief Jane on what to ask: it was becoming increasingly difficult to stop rumours erupting throughout the Factory. It would be impossible if he started openly talking about traitors. He said to the girl: ‘We’ll do nothing about the Russian woman at the moment. And tomorrow press him harder: let’s show Anatoli Vasilevich Sharov that things won’t automatically go his way; that he’s dependent upon us.’

‘It’ll be a pleasure,’ said Jane.

‘Set him a definite test,’ ordered Bell. ‘Ask him to tell you the one thing that will satisfy the controller here—me—that he’s a genuine defector.’

'What's that?' asked Jane.

The Director General shook his head. 'Just see what he says.'

The Russian was sprawled in the fireside chair again. Once more he did not politely stand when Jane entered the room. Instead, with almost childlike expectation, Sharov said: 'What's happened? Have you approached Olga?'

'We've got other things to discuss,' said Jane curtly.

'I want to know about Olga! Where is she?'

'You're lying to me!' accused Jane.

'What!' Some of the bombast leaked from the man, however.

'I said you're lying to me,' repeated Jane. 'What function at your embassy does Vladimir Panchenko fulfil?'

Sharov wetted his lips with his tongue, discomfited. 'He is an officer of the KGB,' he said.

'He's the KGB *rezident*, the head of station, isn't he?'

'He was... it's... I know what you're thinking...' stumbled the man.

Jane cut across him: 'I've already told you what I think. You're lying! You told me you were head of station and you're not!'

'Panchenko's an old man. Drinks too much. All right, I'll admit he officially holds the title but I've been doing the job for the past two years. I've been carrying the old fool. I'm chief of station in everything but official title. I have all the secrets.'

'Why did you lie?' She was being forceful, as the Director General had told her to be, but it could very easily be that all the man had done was exaggerate his own importance.

'Wanted to sound better,' confirmed Sharov, in a mumble. The man was embarrassed now at having lost face and been so easily caught out by a woman.

'What other lies did you tell me?'

'None!' said Sharov defensively. 'And it wasn't really a lie. I do know everything that goes on.'

'Is that true? That you know *everything*?' insisted the girl.

Sharov hesitated. Then he said: 'Yes.'

'Good,' seized Jane. 'Now listen to me very carefully. I am going to ask you a question: whether you are granted asylum and allowed to remain in this country probably depends upon your answer.'

Sharov's uncertainty increased. 'What?'

'I want you to tell me, now, the one thing that will convince my Director that your defection isn't a trick.'

Sharov stared across the narrow space separating the two chairs. 'Go on,' he urged.

'That's it,' said Jane. 'The one secret from within your organization inside the London embassy that will convince him.'

'But...' Sharov waved his hands helplessly. 'There's so much. All our communication codes. Every KGB officer I know to be based in Britain and France: the identities of a great many in Moscow, too. The names of British-born spies we have in place throughout Britain. All the liaison identities of other Eastern bloc intelligence officers based in London...'

Jane became frustrated that Samuel Bell had not briefed her more fully: how could she properly interrogate the man without knowing what the one piece of information was? There was a writing bureau on the far side of the room. She nodded towards it and said: 'Start writing it all down.'

'It will take days. Weeks,' protested the man.

'Make a start,' said Jane. 'I want a general list of headings, of everything you can tell us. And then as much specific detail as you can provide today.'

There was nothing that Jane could do but sit and wait while the Russian began his lists. As she did so her suspicion grew that, whatever it was the Director General wanted, what Sharov was now providing wasn't it. Dusk was already settling, darkening the room, when Sharov groaned to a halt. 'I'm tired. I can't do any more today.' He offered Jane a sheaf of papers and said: 'It is a lot, yes? Good stuff?'

It certainly looked it, thought Jane. She said: 'We'll have to see.'

Back at the Factory, much later that same night, the Director General sorted with increasing despair through the notes that Sharov had produced. At last he looked up to Jane and said, simply: 'No.'

Olga Zarya was put under intensive observation. She was followed from the Russian diplomatic enclave in London's Highgate to the Soviet trade offices and photographed extensively, both with her husband, Ivan, and separately. Surveillance reports talked of her being a serious-mannered, even sad-looking woman, an opinion confirmed by the photographs, but there was no suggestion of her appearing overly worried or apprehensive, as if she were expecting outside contact that might create difficulties for her from her own authorities. Neither was there any indication of increased watchfulness upon her by the Russians which might have hinted that her affair with Anatoli Sharov was known about and that they suspected some intermediary approach being made to her from the man.

Sharov's defection and request for asylum were made public, a week after he ran. The Soviet authorities at the embassy immediately approached the Foreign Office with a formal request for access.

'He is to be told,' ordered Bell. 'Diplomatic protocol insists upon it.'

'What about all these lists?' queried Jane. 'They don't appear to be what you want.'

"*The names of British-born spies we have in place throughout Britain,*" recited Bell, reconsidering his dismissal of Sharov's attempt to prove himself.

'Those were the words he used,' confirmed the girl.

'We'll try again,' decided the Director General. 'Put on even more pressure...' He smiled. 'And I think I'll come down tomorrow. Not to take part in the interrogation, of course. But to be on the spot for immediate consultation.' He *had* to find out if Sharov had the name of his traitor.

Jane didn't travel to Sussex the following day in her open-topped sports car but in the Director General's limousine, so that he could rehearse how she was to handle that day's encounter. Jane listened intently and then said critically: 'You're putting me at a disadvantage, not telling me fully what it is you want to know. It makes it extremely difficult.'

'I know that,' apologized Bell. 'I'm afraid that's the way it's got to be. It's to overcome the problem that I'm coming down with you today.'

The gate checks upon the Director General were as stringent as ever, which was fortunate because if they hadn't been Bell would have reprimanded the guards for carelessness, even though they knew him to be the Director General. They were greeted at the door again by Hendrix, who agreed that the drawing room in which Jane was conducting the debriefing had, in addition to two sets of recording equipment, a two-way mirror through which Bell could watch the interview.

There was no longer any arrogance about Sharov's attitude. The burly Russian was already at the writing bureau, head bent in concentration. He looked anxiously up as she came into the room and said: 'I've been working for two hours already. I've made four more lists.' There was an eager-to-please entreaty in his voice.

'That's good,' said Jane. She was still undecided about the man's truthfulness. The intrusion of the Director General wasn't helping: it was, in fact, creating a distraction.

'What about Olga?' demanded the man urgently. 'Please tell me you've made contact with her!'

Instead of answering, Jane, upon Bell's instructions, offered the man the surveillance photographs and said: 'We're keeping a close watch.'

'I don't want her watched! I want her here, with me. She'll be going through hell, wondering what's happened to me. Wondering about how I'm going to contact her.'

'There's been a request from your embassy,' disclosed Jane. 'They want to meet you. It's diplomatic regulations that I tell you. If you want to see them, we'll make you available. Not here, of course. Somewhere else. But it'll be safe.'

'No!' rejected the man at once, loudly. For the first time he looked truly frightened. His tongue came out over his lips and a sheen of perspiration grew on his forehead. Hurriedly he added: 'I don't want to see anybody. Just Olga. Just get Olga to me.'

Jane suddenly felt sorry for Sharov. Gently she said: 'I don't want you to go on with the lists, not for the moment. I want to talk specifically about something. You told me you knew names of British-born spies in place throughout England.'

'I haven't had time to write them all out yet,' he said eagerly.

Jane raised her hand, stopping the flurry of words. 'Just listen,' she said. 'I don't want a list. I just want one name. Who is the person who has managed to get into a branch of British intelligence?'

'What!' exclaimed the Russian.

'You heard me.'

Sharov slowly shook his head. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You have to, Anatoli. If you know all the secrets of your intelligence organization in London, which you've told me you do, then you have to know the name.'

'Maybe I exaggerated a little,' conceded the man. 'I thought I knew everything. Honestly I did. But I don't know of a spy in place within any British intelligence bureau. Please believe me!'

There were a few unanswered doubts but Jane decided that she did believe the man. Because of the restrictions imposed upon her by the Director General she

did not know how to phrase any ancillary questions. She said: 'I want you to reconsider everything very carefully. What else have you misled me about?'

'Nothing!' implored Sharov desperately. 'I'm being totally honest now.'

Jane thought she saw her escape, to get to the Director General for further guidance. 'I'm going to leave you for a little while. I want you to think through what you've said. I want all of us to be absolutely sure about this.'

Outside in the corridor Jane hesitated, realizing that she didn't know how to find Bell in his concealed observation room. She started to walk further into the house and then smiled with relief at the sight of the Director General emerging through a side door, coming to meet her. He was stern-faced, angry almost.

'It's not going well, is it?' she acknowledged at once.

'I don't know what to think about the man,' said Bell. 'If he's who he says he is, he must know.'

'Know what?' demanded Jane, exasperated. 'Which of the British services has been penetrated?'

Bell shook his head, not so much in refusal as of not listening to her. 'You did well, leaving him in there uncertain like you did. Tell him you are going to give him one more chance. Hendrix has invited us to lunch here. We'll accept so that Sharov has some time finally to decide what he's going to do. Warn him. Warn him that unless we get it all, we've no intention whatsoever of trying to reunite him with his girlfriend. Nor will we grant him asylum. We'll make him available to his own embassy people and they can repatriate him to Moscow.'

'That's...!' started Jane, horrified at the brutality.

'...being as tough as we've got to be,' insisted Bell.

Sharov seemed a shrunken, crushed man when Jane re-entered the drawing room. He said: 'I don't know what else to say.'

'Then hear what I've got to say,' said Jane uncomfortably. Sharov's eyes started from his head and he became very red-faced as Jane recounted what the Director General had ordered.

When she finished the man said, aghast: 'Why are you doing this to me? Treating me like this! I'm doing all I can. Everything. Please don't be like this. It's like I'm an animal.'

It was exactly like treating him as an animal, thought Jane: a taunted, baited animal. But to what purpose? She said: 'You've got until this afternoon. OK?'

'I don't know what you want!' sobbed Sharov.

'Until this afternoon,' repeated Jane, not knowing what else to say. She didn't know what they wanted, either.

It was not an easy meal. Hendrix tried his best to play the considerate host and the food and wine were good, but Bell sat enclosed within himself, drinking more than he ate, deep in thought. And Jane was unsettled by the direction in which she'd had to take the interview. She completely believed now that Sharov was telling the truth and that the threat she'd been told to make was pointless bullying that could achieve nothing. Worse, it was clearly something which they would have to go back upon because although the practical assessment was not her responsibility what the Russian had so far provided was unarguably valuable. So there could be no question of refusing him asylum. She

hoped she hadn't pressed Sharov too far to prevent his realizing that, in the security of his upstairs room in which he had been locked for his midday meal.

Jane was glad when their own meal ended.

'Well,' said Hendrix, relieved also, 'let's hope, now he's had time to think, that it'll come at last.'

They were in the corridor outside the drawing room when the shout came from above. At first Jane couldn't make out what it was but then she did, running after the two men who were just slightly ahead of her.

She got to Sharov's room before the body was cut down. He'd used his trouser belt to hang himself, looping it over some overhead pipes leading from the bathroom. The pipes had bent under his weight but stopped short of breaking.

'Oh no!' said Jane faintly.

'It wasn't your fault,' said the Director General at once. 'I dictated everything that was done.'

'He was genuine,' said Jane distantly. 'All he did was love someone enough to want to run away with her. And couldn't understand why we treated him as we did.'

'And he knew a lot, too,' said Bell, professionally hard. 'Maybe not what I wanted to know. But a lot.'

'Poor Anatoli,' said Jane.

'Yes,' agreed Bell. 'Poor man.'

