The long read

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By Shaun Walker

'Peter Herrmann' who was recruited to the KGB by his father. Photograph: Pete Kiehart/The Guardian

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Rudi Herrmann took a deep breath and asked his son Peter to sit down. "I have a story to tell you," he said. Rudi had been preparing for this conversation for several years, running over the words in his mind. He was about to tell his 16-year-old son that everything Peter thought he knew about their family was a lie.

The pair sat on a bench, and Peter waited quietly for whatever it was his father wanted to say. He was an academically gifted and unfailingly polite child, but he had been struggling psychologically. He had few friends and felt overwhelmed at home. Rudi, an ambitious German-Canadian film-maker, was charming with colleagues and friends, but with his son he was something of a tyrant: not violent, but psychologically domineering. He was disdainful of American pop culture, insisting that Peter not waste his time on mind-rotting pursuits such as reading comics or listening to rock music. It was almost as if he was actively trying to sabotage Peter's efforts to fit in.

The endless upheavals in Peter's childhood had not helped him to feel settled. First, the family had moved from Germany to Canada when he was four. Then, when he started feeling at home in Toronto, he was pulled out of his genteel school and transferred to New York, where his new classmates roughed him up for lunch money. His parents had no living relatives, and the six-year age gap between him and his younger brother made it difficult for them to connect.

The only part of growing up in the Herrmann family that Peter did enjoy was the frequent travel: summer holidays in Europe and road trips across the US to accompany his dad on filming assignments. At home, his father gave orders; on the road, it felt to Peter that they were more like partners.

In spring 1974, they took a trip to Chile. On the way back to New York, they stopped over in Peru. It was here in Lima that Rudi decided the time had come for his big reveal. As they walked through Miraflores, an upmarket neighbourhood of Lima perched on bluffs above the ocean, Rudi ordered his son to sit down on a bench overlooking the water.

Rudi explained to Peter that what he was about to tell him had to stay secret. He could not discuss it with his friends, and certainly not with Michael, his younger brother. Peter nodded, and Rudi began: "I am not who you think I am. I am not a German, and I'm not called Rudi. I am a Czech

man named Dalibor Valoušek, and I work for the Soviet Union, for the KGB." His mission as a spy was to work to bring about world peace, he said.

Two thoughts coursed through Peter's mind. For years, he had felt unable to relate to the world and the people in it. Part of that, he was sure, was because he had no family beyond his parents and brother. As his father told him about grandparents, uncles and cousins behind the iron curtain, he wondered whether everything would now change. At the same time, his father's admission was viscerally shocking. The Russians! The KGB! The thoughts hit him like lightning bolts.

Peter had, with the discreet curation of his father, witnessed enough inequality and unfairness in American life to know it wasn't the paradise that some made it out to be. He had read plenty about Watergate and Vietnam. Even so, he was certain that the Russians were the bad guys. But then, his dad wasn't a bad guy, and his dad was working for the Russians. So perhaps they were not so bad after all?

"Does Mother know?" he asked quietly.

"She also is an agent of the KGB," Rudi told his son.

Rudi came to the most important part of the conversation. "Would you be willing to become an intelligence officer like me?" he asked. Peter's head was spinning, and he didn't know what to think or say. But he stayed outwardly calm, and nodded his assent.

After the conversation, Rudi excitedly messaged his handlers that his son had agreed to sign up. From Moscow, a reply came: the family should travel to the Soviet Union that summer, to formalise Peter's induction into the KGB and begin his training.

More than 50 years later, the man who was once known as Peter Herrmann sat opposite me on a sofa at his house in the suburbs of Washington DC. In the half-century since the conversation in Lima, he had only told the full story of how he was dragged into the KGB twice: once to his wife, shortly before they got married, and once in a series of interviews with me over the past few years.

"I was on autopilot," he said, recalling the first months after his teenage recruitment. "It was really just like: 'Show that you can do this. Because that's what your dad wants you to do.'"

eter's father was what the KGB called an "illegal", part of Moscow's most prestigious and secretive spy programme. The agency trained Soviet bloc citizens for years until they could convincingly impersonate westerners,

Pthen dispatched them abroad for missions that could last decades. The KGB recruited Rudi in 1955 when he was a 26-year-old student at Prague's Charles University. They sent him to Halle in East Germany, to undergo intensive language training in preparation for a long mission abroad in which he would pose as a German.

Rudi was given the identity of Rudolf Herrmann, a Nazi soldier who had, in reality, perished in the Soviet Union during the war. In Halle, he began a romance with his German teacher, Inge, and after evaluation by the KGB it was agreed the pair could be dispatched abroad as a couple. The KGB had recently started dispatching illegals in pairs, although it was always assumed that the man would be the lead operative. The thinking was that couples could keep a watchful eye on one another in the field, as well as provide mutual support to overcome psychological crises.

In late 1957, "Rudi", Inge and their newborn son, Peter, crossed into West Germany, where they posed as anti-communist East Germans determined to embark on a new life. Before long, they acquired West German passports, and in February 1962 the family left for Canada. They settled in a suburb of Toronto and bought a German deli on Yonge Street, close to the headquarters of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Inge got busy in the kitchen, cooking up large batches of potato salad and baking loaves of dark bread.

The deli soon became a hit with Toronto's German immigrant community, particularly those with rightwing views, who were regaled with tales of Rudi's supposed wartime heroics. Sometimes, there were after-hours gatherings for regulars, and the men sang Nazi war songs. But there were also visitors from CBC headquarters, whom Rudi took care to befriend. He was an entertaining storyteller and made friends easily. Before long, he got a job as a sound technician at CBC, and studied film-making in his free time.

Rudi Herrmann in the 1970s. Photograph: Elliot Holar

The couple enrolled Peter in a local kindergarten, and in 1963 Inge gave birth to a second son, Michael. The Herrmanns had become a model Canadian family, and in February 1967 they became naturalised citizens, taking the oath of allegiance to the queen in a Toronto courthouse. Ten days later, a radio message from the KGB came with new orders: make all necessary preparations to move to the US.

They settled in Hartsdale, an hour's train ride north of New York City. Peter didn't know his father had selected the house with specific criteria in mind: it was surrounded by tall trees on all sides except to the east, from where radio messages would arrive, and was set back from the road up a steep driveway, out of sight of curtain-twitching neighbours.

After they moved, Rudi cultivated friendships with employees at IBM, whose headquarters at Armonk was not far from his new home. The company commissioned him to make training and sales films, as well as shorts that were meant for screening at conventions. He equipped his basement with cutting-edge darkroom equipment, and IBM colleagues who worked with him on the films came to the Hartsdale house to edit footage. The accoutrements of Rudi's life as a spy were kept locked away in a desk upstairs, out of the sight of his guests and his two sons. Once a week, he took out his radio and decoded a message from Moscow.

For illegals, in-person meetings with their KGB handlers were rare, and usually took place in third countries to lower the risk of the FBI catching the scent. At one of these meetings, in Paris, Rudi was informed that his tasks in the US would be to look out for progressives and to try to penetrate the Hudson Institute, a conservative thinktank the KGB believed was a front for the US government. Rudi pointed out what seemed like an obvious flaw in the plan: he had an excellent degree from Charles University in Prague, but under a different identity. Now, he was a freelance cameraman with no educational qualifications and little excuse to infiltrate a thinktank. The handler shrugged. Rudi should do his best.

The awkward exchange reflected the changing nature of the KGB's most prized spying programme. Back in the 1920s and 30s, illegals had been virtuoso operators, waltzing across borders and switching passports at will, frequently taking on new identities. But by the 1960s, the programme had become more regimented, and the missions much longer in duration. It had become harder to conjure up fake identities that could withstand scrutiny, and the cold war brought with it a vigilant counterintelligence environment, particularly in the US.

Many illegals cracked under the pressure of their assignments: some defected, while others had nervous breakdowns or were withdrawn in disgrace. Rudi was one of the success stories, but he was frustrated with his handlers. He wondered if he would ever be able to penetrate government circles in the way they wanted, given his lack of genuine qualifications in the west.

It was around this time that the contours of a plan began to form in Rudi's mind. If he could not deliver what the KGB demanded, perhaps his son could.

Children always created a dilemma for illegals. To tell the truth to them was to take an enormous operational risk. What if they blurted something out to friends or teachers? Often, illegals only revealed their identities to their children once they were travelling back to the Soviet Union at the end of their missions.

But Rudi had a more radical idea. He wanted to reveal to Peter that his parents worked for the KGB, and to train him to continue their work. Rudi thought that turning his son into a second-generation illegal would kill two birds with one stone: it would save Peter from becoming an ordinary American capitalist and being ripped away from him in the process, and it would provide the KGB with a new kind of operative, who had a real American upbringing and could pass government security checks more easily.

Rudi first floated his plan with the KGB two years before he told Peter about it. His handlers were intrigued by the idea of a second-generation illegal, but also wary of causing a potential security breach if it was handled the wrong way. Rudi was told to wait a few years before making his move.

Peter Herrmann (second from left) with his mother Inge, father Rudi and brother Michael. Photograph: Elliot Holar

In 1974, he took Peter on a trip to Chile, telling his son they would be selling a short educational film to nursing institutions in the country. That, of course, was a cover story. A few months earlier, Gen Augusto Pinochet had launched a coup to topple the leftwing presidency of Salvador Allende, and diplomatic relations between Chile and the Soviet Union were swiftly severed. Rudi's job was to spend time on the ground and send back a report on the general mood in the country, gauging whether the new regime was going to last.

After a fortnight in Pinochet's Chile, where the post-coup atmosphere was still combustible, the pair made stopovers in Bolivia and in Peru. In Lima, Rudi sat Peter down and made his recruitment pitch, gaining his son's hesitant agreement. Back in New York, Rudi received detailed travel instructions for a family trip to Moscow in the summer of 1974, once school was finished for the year. Peter was relieved that he had pleased his father by agreeing to the scheme.

Peter and Rudi took separate flights to Europe, having agreed to meet in Denmark a few days later. Inge flew with Peter's younger brother, Michael, to Spain. She dropped him off at a summer camp there and told him she was going to West Germany and would see him in a few weeks. Then she headed to Moscow.

A few days after their arrival in Copenhagen, Rudi woke Peter at dawn, and the pair sped to the port and crept aboard a small Soviet freighter docked there. A brusque man showed them to a tiny cabin below deck, sparsely furnished with a bunk bed and small toilet. A grimy half-light emanated from a small porthole. A few times a day, there was a knock at the door, and a tray of food was left for them. At Rudi's request, the man who brought their meals rustled up some English-language pamphlets on Marxism-Leninism, which Peter leafed through without understanding much. It was his first introduction to the ideology he was now expected to spend his life serving. The journey stretched out for three long days before Peter spotted the docks of Leningrad through the cabin's filthy window. When they disembarked, they were met by a pair of low-level functionaries, who took them on a tour of the city.

Peter felt as if he had stepped on to an alien planet. There were no billboards, the streets were vast and the signs were incomprehensible. In South America, Rudi and Peter had explored on foot; here, they were whisked around by stern men in black Volga limousines. After a day in Leningrad, Rudi and Peter were driven to the railway station, where a private compartment in an overnight express train to Moscow awaited them. On arrival, they took a drive to one of the Stalin-era skyscrapers on the river embankment. To Peter, it looked like a vast castle from a fantasy comic. A safe-house apartment in the building was to be their home in Moscow. Inge was already there. A housekeeper cooked meals for the family, and that first evening the table was set for eight with plates of local delicacies and three glasses per person, for tangy Borjomi mineral water, wine and vodka. Several handlers from Directorate S, which ran the illegals programme, soon arrived for dinner.

The handlers asked Peter questions about his life and his plans. He replied politely and with poise, and the Russians seemed impressed. The next morning, a Directorate S man named Andrei came to lambast Rudi about his supposed failures in the field. Rudi screamed back that Andrei was a "miserable peasant" who had no idea how things really worked in the west. Peter, waiting in the next room, could hear the shouting, but he couldn't make out much of what anyone was saying. He sat quietly and waited for the noise to stop.

During their week-long stay in Moscow, the family was discouraged from venturing out alone; the smallest chance that a visiting tourist could recognise them was too much for the handlers to risk. Still, they made occasional outings: the KGB procured tickets for a folk dance performance, which everyone found tedious, and for the circus, which they enjoyed. On another day, Rudi slipped out of the apartment with Peter to show him the Moscow metro. The boy was astounded by the long escalators that seemed to descend into the bowels of the Earth, to eventually reveal the palatial splendour of the platforms. After Moscow, the family flew to spend a couple of days each in Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Peter met the grandparents he never knew he had. Everyone seemed friendly and warm, but the whole experience was difficult for him to digest. He dealt with it by mostly staying quiet.

On the family's first trip to Moscow, in the summer of 1974, Peter was astounded by the metro. Photograph: Angelo Andreas Zinna/Alamy

When they returned to Moscow, the handlers took Peter out for a day to teach him the basics of evading surveillance. Another man came to the apartment to show him how to write using invisible ink. An old and bumbling technical whiz gave Rudi a new “burst” radio, which would shorten the time it took to transcribe the KGB’s coded messages. The man reminded Peter of a character in Get Smart, the Mel Brooks satire of James Bond, one of his favourite television programmes. In his mind, Peter had imagined attractive, uniformed female agents instructing him, but his teachers were all men.

Over another big dinner, a trainer explained to Peter some of the risks and challenges of being an illegal, and asked if he was willing to be inducted into the programme. He explained how important Peter's parents' work was, and emphasised that their spying contributed to the preservation of global peace. Peter was told he could make his own decision, but it soon became clear that there was a catch. If the handlers sensed that Peter was not truly willing to become a second-generation illegal, it would be too dangerous for him to return to the US. He already knew too much for that. "You either have to be OK with this, and agree to help with your parents' mission, or you have to stay here," one of the men explained to Peter. If he said no, Rudi and Inge would return to the US without him and invent a tragic accident to explain the disappearance of their son.

Peter did not want to be separated from his family, so he nodded that he was happy to begin training. His tasks for now would be minimal: to return home, and start his studies at McGill University in Montreal. He was to keep an eye out for left-leaning students and use his newly acquired skills to prepare reports on them, which his father could then forward to Moscow. He should never publicly espouse leftwing or pro-Soviet views publicly, nor should he socialise with communists or Russians. Peter's training would begin in earnest the next summer, it was agreed, when he would be welcomed back to Moscow for a longer trip. At the end of the night, the men announced they had decided on the code name for Peter's KGB file. He would be known as Erbe, German for "the Inheritor".

A few weeks after the family returned home, Peter headed for college. He had completed his last two years of high school in one, partly because he was clever enough to do so and partly because Rudi and Inge hoped a change in environment would ease the loneliness he had felt at school. But by the time he arrived at McGill, Peter was struggling with numerous dilemmas. Would he be able to fulfil his father's outsized expectations? Would he be able to make friends or meet a girlfriend? Was he really going to work for the KGB for the rest of his life, and would he succeed in not breathing a word of his secret? It was a lot to think about for someone who was still only 16.

As always, Peter was outwardly calm. But something inside him was reaching breaking point. He read Freud and other books on psychoanalysis; he studied literature on neurotic disorders. A few months after starting university, he drew a picture of himself, neck in a noose, dangling lifeless from a hangman's gallows. He gave it the caption "Shit". He mailed it to his parents without any accompanying note. They did not reply.

In May 1975, Peter returned home for the summer. Nobody brought up the cartoon. Peter did not know how to talk about emotions with his father, and Rudi had already forgotten about it, dismissing it to Inge with raised eyebrows as a “college phase”. Instead, Rudi got on with training his son in espionage. He took Peter to New Jersey to demonstrate how “dead drop” operations worked. They spent several hours driving in loops, checking for surveillance, and then made their way to the village of Towaco, about 30 miles west of New York City. Rudi told Peter to toss a line of radiator hose at the base of a large oak tree, and then leave an empty Coca-Cola bottle by another tree, a little further down the road, to indicate the drop had been made. They went to drink coffee and then drove past a third tree, where Rudi pointed out a piece of orange peel. It meant an agent had picked up the drop, he explained, and they could safely drive home. Later that week, he showed Peter how to decode radio messages. He was pleased at how well his son was taking it all in.

That summer, Peter made his first solo trip to the Soviet Union. On Rudi’s instructions, he first flew to Vienna, where he met a man who handed him false papers identifying him as a German tourist, along with a ticket for the hydrofoil to Budapest the next day. When the boat arrived, he was met at the dock and driven to a villa in the Buda hills. “Wait here,” the driver told him, and left.

Peter spent two days in the pleasant villa, where he was both VIP and prisoner. He was waited on by a housekeeper and gorged on cherries from a tree in the garden, but he could not explore the city. On his third day, the driver returned and took Peter to an airfield where he boarded a military transport plane, which took him to an airbase near Moscow. From there, he was driven back to the same apartment he had stayed in the previous year. He was greeted by someone he recognised as one of his father’s handlers and by a younger man who introduced himself as Viktor.

Peter Herrmann in the 1970s. Photograph: Elliot Holar

Over the next few days, Viktor tutored Peter in spy craft, but told him that most of his training would come on the job, from working with his father. The primary purpose of this visit was to show Peter some of the Soviet Union and inspire loyalty toward the socialist nation. Peter and Viktor first flew south to Volgograd, where they visited The Motherland Calls, a statue of a warrior woman - mouth agape, hair swept back, and brandishing a sword - that towered over the city. It was the tallest monument in the world, Peter was told. Tree-lined paths led up to the base of a complex, a cavernous hall bearing names of the dead.

From Volgograd, they flew to Bratsk in the heart of Siberia, the site of a huge dam and hydroelectric plant. Afterwards, there was a fishing expedition on Lake Baikal. Peter and Viktor cast out on to the vast expanse of the lake in a small boat with a couple of locals to guide them. Nobody caught anything. In the end, they spotted another fishing boat nearby and swapped a few bottles of vodka for some freshly caught fish. Viktor cooked up a stew on the boat, which they ate under the stars.

When Peter got home and described the trip to his parents, Rudi was furious at the handlers for not providing more explicit instruction in Marxism-Leninism. Perhaps the KGB felt perks and red-carpet treatment would be more effective incentives for a second-generation illegal, raised in the US,

than earnest exhortations to Soviet ideology. But Rudi muttered angrily that it was more evidence of the incompetence of his handlers.

In early 1976, the centre ordered Rudi to select a new set of dead drop sites, close to the atomic research centre at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He assumed the KGB had an agent on the inside and needed to find a spot to leave money or instructions for them. He took Peter along, to teach him the art of selecting suitable places. Peter soon got the hang of it, and Rudi was impressed when his son found a perfect spot at the back of a small church. Still, he could sense that Peter did not share his ideological affinity with the work.

That summer, Peter was meant to travel to the Soviet Union again. But when he arrived in Vienna, a man named Max told him that the plans had fallen through: Peter would not be going to Moscow this time. The next day, over a drink, Peter told Max that he had applied to transfer from McGill to Georgetown, partly because he was not enjoying life in Canada and partly because the KGB had expressed a preference that he transfer to a US university, where he could make better contacts. Max was delighted at the news and told him he should look out for interesting students and write quarterly reports on them for the KGB: anyone with fathers in government, anyone who was strongly progressive, and anyone critical of US foreign policy. Max gave him an address in Mexico to memorise, the place where he was to post his reports. Max bade Peter farewell, leaving him to fill his weeks lounging around Vienna, visiting museums and going to the opera.

Peter started at Georgetown in the autumn of 1976. Every now and then, he wrote a letter in invisible ink profiling various fellow students and sent it off to the address Max had given him. He took classes in Arabic, because the KGB felt the language might help him gain access to more interesting government jobs upon graduation. The next spring, Rudi came to visit, and Peter finally found the resolve to tell his father that something was wrong. He explained that the stress of his double life had become too much, and he planned to take a year off from university before his final year. He wanted to spend it somewhere in Europe.

“I need a break, and I need to clear my head,” Peter told his father.

Rudi was not happy, but agreed they would talk about it when Peter came to New York for the summer. A few weeks later, Peter took the train north, and as he was coming up the escalator at Penn station, he saw his father waiting for him at the top, flanked by two men in suits.

“Peter, come with us,” said Rudi. “These men need to talk to you.”

The FBI had followed Rudi for months before approaching him disguised as a group of clients who wanted to commission a film. Once they had him alone, they gave him a choice: either life in prison, or cooperate with them as a double agent. Rudi was a devoted communist, but for years he had been frustrated with the unrealistic demands and lack of gratitude from his handlers. For him, cooperating with the FBI offered a way to put one over on the men in Moscow, who he thought had failed to utilise his talents properly. He made his decision quickly, saying he was ready to work with the FBI as long as he was not expected to give up his Marxist beliefs or "kill for America". The FBI told him to keep his normal communication schedule with the KGB so that Moscow would not suspect anything was wrong.

As always, Inge and Peter were not consulted before Rudi made his decision. Although Inge was the quieter half of the couple, her ideological devotion to communism burned more brightly than Rudi's. She was devastated, worried about the effects on the children and furious at the decision to cooperate with the enemy. Peter was briefly interrogated, but was mostly left to his own devices at Georgetown. Two handlers, one from the FBI and one from the CIA, met with him once a month to check in. The meetings were low-key and sometimes enjoyable; they took Peter to restaurants, a theme park and, on a couple of occasions, even a strip joint. When he graduated, they found him a job at a small lobbying firm in DC. Rudi, in his ongoing communications with Moscow, invented ever more reasons why Peter could not yet return to the Soviet Union for further training.

In 1979, the FBI decided the game had gone on long enough. They told Rudi he should prepare to break off all contact with Moscow. Peter would have to get ready to disappear, too. He had been dating a woman in DC for the previous 18 months, but had not yet told her anything about his strange family background. Unwilling to start now, he deliberately escalated one of their arguments to the point that the relationship disintegrated in acrimony. Now, he would not be missed.

Elliot Holar in Washington DC, in March 2025. Photograph: Pete Kiehart/The Guardian

The FBI moved the family to an interim safe house in Annapolis, Maryland. In March 1980, they arranged a strange press conference, at which Rudi talked about his work as an illegal, from behind a cloudy screen and with his voice disguised. The aim was to cause maximum embarrassment to the KGB. The FBI men had a certain grudging respect for Rudi and his “scary” level of discipline, one of those involved in the case told me. They were sceptical that the time and expense required to create illegals was justified by the espionage returns, but they also realised that an undetected illegal was always one recruitment away from causing enormous damage.

After the press conference, the FBI moved the family again, this time to the west coast. The Herrmanns became the Holars; Rudi chose the surname as it was the name of a Czech artist he liked. Peter wanted something “short but distinctive” for a first name, and decided on Elliot. Moving into witness protection was oddly similar to life as an illegal: starting afresh in a new city, with a new name and the need for a batch of invented but credible tales about childhood and youth should anyone become too curious.

At the age of 22, Elliot Holar packed Peter Herrmann into a box, and planned to lock him away for good.

first tracked down Elliot in 2019, having read about his case in leaked KGB documents and a 1980s book where his father had been interviewed after defection. I wrote him a letter asking to interview him for a book project I

I was just starting, about the history of the KGB illegals programme. A few months later, I received a polite rejection. He had no desire to relive these stories, he told me, but he was not opposed to meeting to hear more about the book. In that first meeting, at a coffee shop near his home in the suburbs of Washington DC, he laid out the broad details of his life since he moved into witness protection.

After disappearing in 1980, he had found a job in IT for a company in San Diego and started life afresh. His younger brother, who had been barely a teenager when Rudi was apprehended by the FBI and knew nothing of his parents' double life, struggled to adapt, however, and was constantly getting into trouble. Their parents remained devoted communists, and in 1986 tried to move the whole family back to Czechoslovakia, but they were denied visas. Instead, they all settled in the Washington DC area - Peter and Michael were both adults now, but Rudi still made the decisions for all four of them.

Not long after the move, Elliot began a romance with a woman at work, who a few years later became his wife. They had two children, now grown up, and back when we first met in 2019, Elliot was coming to the end of a long and successful career in the IT sector. His mother died in 2004 and his brother in 2015, after a difficult life complicated by an Asperger's diagnosis and a lack of understanding from his father, who dismissed his younger son's developmental issues as laziness.

Dalibor Valoušek, AKA Rudi Herrmann, AKA Boris Holar died in 2017, in his late 80s. In the final years, he suddenly began talking about the past, regaling meetings of his seniors book club with endless tales of espionage daring. It is not clear whether the other participants realised these revelations were all true or dismissed them as senile inventions. Elliot wondered whether, now that his father was telling anyone who'd listen about his KGB past, it would attract attention and journalists would come knocking, but none did until my letter.

At our first meeting, Elliot told me that even his friends and most of his family did not know about his past, and he did not plan to change that. But gradually, in a series of long discussions over the next few years, he opened up. In the end, he even suggested that I should use his current name, rather than hiding him behind his long-abandoned Peter Herrmann identity. When I first contacted him he was still working, and did not want to draw undue attention to his unusual background in the office, he said. Now, retired, he feels freer. But I also sensed that talking through the events was a way to reclaim parts of his story, after so long feeling like a bit-part player in the shadow of his father.

At a later meeting, I asked if he had been forced to invent a complicated web of lies to avoid talking about the past over the years. He told me that, in fact,

he was able to rely on most people's lack of curiosity. He recalled hints not followed up, or anomalies never questioned. "You know, it's surprisingly easy to not have to tell stories that you don't want to tell. I've only realised that recently, but it's really amazing," he said, with a wry smile. "It's amazing what you can do or say and people won't notice."

In our most recent meeting, in late February this year, we chatted on the sofas in the basement room of his current suburban home, a few miles from the house where the whole family had moved back in 1986. I asked him if, looking back at the whole story, he is angry with his parents, or with the KGB, for what they put him through.

"I'm not angry at anybody," he answered quickly. "If I was angry at anybody I'd be angry at a lot of people, and what good does that do me? We watch these murder mysteries, and there's always all these serial killers who decide they're angry and then they invest their whole lives and their intricate skills in these incredibly insane plots to do serial killings … I'm not like that," he said.

I suggested that there might be an intermediate response between no anger at all and serial killing, and he laughed. When it came to his father, he admitted, he was torn about what he should feel: "In some ways I'm very angry at him, but also I always admired and respected him and thought he was a caring father. And in a lot of ways he was, but not in all of them. Now that I've had kids, I just can't imagine sending my kids off like he did when I was so young."

While Elliot's case is unusual in the century-long history of Moscow's illegals programme, I told him that all my research suggested that these long-term spying missions had almost always been incompatible with a healthy family life. Illegals could keep their children in the dark, or they could try to drag them into the work. Neither option was conducive to happy outcomes.

"Fundamentally, that's what it comes down to," said Elliot, nodding in agreement. "I just don't see why you thought being an illegal and having children was a good idea. I could fault both my parents for that, honestly, because it's a slippery slope once you start. All the other things that come up later, those are just consequences of that decision."

Adapted from The Illegals: Russia's Most Audacious Spies and the Plot to Infiltrate the West by Shaun Walker, published on 17 April (Profile Books, £22; Knopf in the US). To support the Guardian and Observer, order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

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