

THE
HAPPY
TRAITOR

SPIES, LIES AND EXILE IN RUSSIA:
THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF
GEORGE BLAKE

SIMON KUPER

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Contents

1. Finding Blake	I
2. An Ordinary Dutch Boy	12
3. A Jewish Mansion in an Arab City	17
4. Deception Becomes Daily Habit	22
5. A Legendary Centre of Hidden Power	32
6. The Prisoner Converts	42
7. Lunchtime Spy	56
8. A Mole in Berlin	67
9. The Game Is Up	80
10. The Human Cost	100
11. Espionage, Balls and Rackets	114
12. Foreign Traitor	122
13. Headstands in Jail	130
14. Straight Out of Hitchcock	140
15. Someone Who Adjusts Easily	158
16. Henri Curiel, A Parallel Life	185
17. Cynicism and Christmas Pudding	196
18. 'Tragic I Am Not'	210
Afterword	219
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	221
<i>Notes</i>	223
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Books and Articles</i>	263
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	269

Finding Blake

George Blake had spent the last forty minutes hiding in a passageway just inside the wall of Wormwood Scrubs Prison, waiting to escape. Sean Bourke, his accomplice on the outside, was supposed to throw a rope-ladder over the wall. But Bourke had gone quiet. Blake, soaked by the torrential rain, was getting desperate.

As the clock ticked to 6.50 p.m. on 22 October 1966, Blake began to suspect he wouldn't hear from the Irishman again. He grew so despondent that he almost switched off his walkie-talkie. He heard the bell calling the prisoners back to their cells. When they were counted at 7 p.m., his absence would be discovered. Police around the country would be alerted. In 1961 the Briton of Dutch origin had been unmasked as a KGB spy and had become the first officer in the UK's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, known today as MI6) ever to be convicted as a traitor.¹ His forty-two-year jail sentence was the longest in British history. If he were caught trying to escape from the Scrubs, he could expect to be moved to a maximum-security jail, far from his wife and sons, and one day, decades later, to die there.

At about five minutes to seven Blake made his last bid for freedom. Using the agreed code names, he called Bourke on the walkie-talkie: 'Fox Michael! You MUST throw the ladder now, you simply must. There is no more time! Throw it now, Fox Michael! Are you still there? Come in, please.' Bourke on the outside wasn't sure the coast was clear, but chucked the ladder over the wall regardless.² Blake saw 'this thin nylon curling down like a snake'. Here was his moment of truth. He ran to the ladder and climbed up it. 'It seemed amazingly easy', he would recall many years later. Bourke, seeing his face appear at the top of the wall, shouted, 'Jump, jump, for Christ's sake, jump!'³ Blake jumped, and, evading Bourke's clumsy effort to catch him, fell hard on the road, breaking his wrist and cutting his forehead. For a moment he lay still. Then Bourke bundled him into his old Humber car and whisked him away to a rented bedsit just a few hundred yards from the Scrubs. The streets of west London were almost empty. The rain had made it a perfect night for an escape.⁴

Within about forty-five minutes prison officers had found the rope-ladder and, lying against the prison's outside wall, like a clue out of Agatha Christie, a pot of pink chrysanthemums.

When Blake's fellow prisoners heard of his escape, they celebrated.⁵ Zeno, a war hero who was in the Scrubs for murdering his ex-girlfriend's lover, wrote:

There must have been nearer a hundred than fifty escapes in the years I have spent here, but I have never known a reaction like this. By concentrating, I can distinguish words and snatches of conversation.

... 'He's fucked 'em ...' And then, far away and faintly from the south end of the prison, singing, 'For he's a jolly good fellow' ... I have always known of his popularity, but until now had never appreciated the extent of it.⁶

‘Blake the Spy Escapes from Scrubs Cell: Iron Bars Sawn Away’, screamed the *Observer*’s front-page headline the next morning.⁷ The newspaper reminded readers that at his trial in 1961 Blake had ‘admitted that every single official document of any importance to which he had access as an intelligence officer was passed to his Russian contact’.

Some quotes from a safe-robber recently released from the Scrubs added personal detail on the double agent: ‘He was very pro-British. He was a Communist, but an ideological one ... He was very popular with the other prisoners ... I have known men who went to him for Arabic, French and German lessons.’

Police were watching airports, south coast ports and Communist embassies in London. But a spokesman at the Soviet embassy told the *Observer*: ‘We have nothing to say. Why should you think he has come here?’

* * *

I first became curious about Blake in 1999, when I came across an interview that he had given to a Dutch magazine from his exile in Moscow. I was immediately, selfishly, struck by how similar our backgrounds were. We were both mixes of British, Jewish and cosmopolitan, raised in the Netherlands.

His life story was remarkable, yet I had barely heard of him before. He had been front-page world news when he was jailed in 1961, and again when he escaped. But soon after his disappearance from the Scrubs he was practically forgotten, the sort of figure from a bygone age who is assumed to have died decades ago. I began to read about his life, and discovered a delicious cast of supporting characters that ran from Alfred Hitchcock to Vladimir Putin.

Then, in 2005, I met Derk Sauer, a Dutchman who had moved to Russia in 1989 and become a Moscow media mogul. (As well as founding the *Moscow Times* newspaper, he had the brilliant idea of starting Russian editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*.) Sauer, a Maoist himself in his youth, had become friendly with his fellow Dutch Muscovite. Some years their families got together to celebrate *Sinterklaas*, the Dutch St Nicholas's Day. Before I flew to Moscow in May 2012, to speak at a conference, I asked Sauer if Blake might be willing to give me an interview.

This wasn't the sort of thing Blake did much. Being a spy, he was by nature secretive.⁸ Except briefly around 1990, when he was plugging his autobiography, he very seldom spoke to English-language journalists (and always informed the KGB about his interviews, 'out of courtesy').⁹

By the time I was trying to find him, Blake had acquired a new reason for avoiding journalists: he didn't want to be asked about Putin. Though Blake retained some of his old Communist dreams, he had become a peace-loving democrat at heart, and he disliked his fellow KGB alumnus. However, Putin had the power to deprive Blake and his wife of their dacha and pensions, so Blake didn't want to offend him.

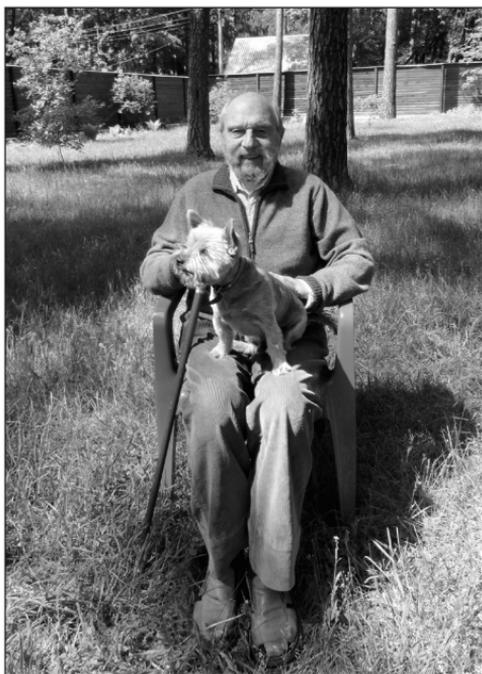
Before Blake agreed to let me interview him, he insisted on interviewing me. I rang him at the agreed time, from a friend's Russian mobile phone. I was standing in Moscow's Novodevichy cemetery, where I had been looking for the graves of Chekhov and Nikita Khrushchev. On the phone Blake and I spoke Dutch. His accent was pre-war chic, mixed with the hard tones of his native Rotterdam. He was chatty and quick to laugh. He skirted around the topic of Putin, so in the end I raised it: I promised not to ask him about contemporary Russian politics.

The other obstacle to an interview, he told me apologetically, was his family. He said his three British sons (establishment types) didn't like it when newspapers ran articles about their dad the Soviet spy. (In fact, I later learned that it was probably their mother, Gillian, Blake's ex-wife, who preferred to keep the whole story quiet.¹⁰)

I agreed to publish the interview only in Dutch. That was good enough for Blake, and he invited me to his house. I think he did it because he trusted Sauer, because he welcomed having someone to speak Dutch with and because he liked the idea of being able to reach readers in his home country after seventy years of separation.

I later negotiated with Sauer that I would also be allowed to publish in English after Blake died, when his family was going to have to live with a rush of publicity whether I wrote anything or not. I have wrestled with my decision to publish in English at all. In part the decision is obviously selfish: I wanted to write this book. But I also felt that Blake owed the British an explanation.

The day after the phone call in the cemetery, Sauer's Russian chauffeur collected me at the Stalinist-Gothic Hotel Ukraina on the Moskva river, and drove me out of town to Blake's dacha – his former weekend house where by 2012 he was living full-time. Even on a Saturday morning there were traffic jams, but we got to Blake's neighbourhood early, so I went to sit in the sun in a local park. It could have been a middle-class suburb of London or Paris. Pleasant white apartment blocks fringed a children's playground. People in western clothes passed – a girl jogging, a man pushing a pram, a boy in a baseball cap riding a bike with training wheels. There were still some recognisably Soviet figures: a babushka with a cane and rotting teeth sitting on a bench chatting to a park keeper;



1. Blake and his dog, Lyusha, in the garden of his house, which was a gift from the KGB in recognition of his services.

a man carrying a plastic bag and his morning beer. But with hindsight, that spring morning in 2012 – when the oil price was over \$100 a barrel, and before Putin invaded Ukraine – was about as good as Russian life has ever got.

Then I walked to Blake's house. In a quiet wooded lane a little old man with a cane in the shape of a dog's head stood waiting for me. George Blake had a straggly beard, false teeth, big ears, slippers and liver spots. His famous dapperness had gone, but he retained his deceiver's charm. He led the way through a door into his vast garden. Clothes hung on the washing-line, a grandchild's football lay in the sun, and there was a plague of mosquitoes.

The wooden exterior of the dacha was painted light green. ‘This house, you would not believe it, was built before the Revolution’, he marvelled.¹¹ It was here that the Blakes entertained Kim Philby on 1970s weekends, until the two defectors fell out.

Blake’s Russian wife, Ida, and a noisy little terrier came out of the house to say hello. Blake took me into the conservatory. Many of the books on the shelves were from the library that he had inherited from Donald Maclean, his dear friend and fellow Soviet double agent. There were old jacketless hardbacks of Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson*, Faulkner, H. G. Wells, a biography of Dickens and the *Life and Teachings of Karl Marx* by somebody called Lewis, alongside histories of the Dutch resistance. In a windowsill stood a red-jacketed British Beef-eater doll – perhaps a reminder of Blake’s imprisonment as a traitor in London, or perhaps just a souvenir.

Ida brought us tea and salami sandwiches (*‘buterbrod’*, she announced in Russian). The dog, who was settling down to sleep at our feet, got his own portion. Blake and I sat side by side on a sofa, close together, so that he could at least hear me. His blue eyes were bloodshot. ‘I cannot see you,’ he explained. ‘I see that somebody is sitting there, but who that is and what he looks like, I can’t see.’¹²

That morning in 2012, Blake was eighty-nine-years-old, the last survivor of the British spies who had defected to Moscow. When he arrived there in 1967, after his jailbreak, Guy Burgess was already dead. Maclean and Philby died in Moscow in the 1980s.

I asked Blake whether he wanted to speak Dutch or English. He replied, in Dutch, ‘When I get the chance – which happens very seldom – I find it very pleasant to talk in Dutch. Possibly that is how I feel most at home.’ He added that he spoke Russian with ‘a Dutch accent. I speak it very, errrr’ – and

here he shifted momentarily from Dutch to English – ‘*fluent, fluently*. With my wife, and the children, my grandson, my daughter-in-law.’¹³

I spent about three hours with Blake, trying to get him to reflect on his story: from the Dutch resistance in the Second World War to British spy to KGB colonel. Sauer later told me that it would be Blake’s last interview. I had grown up in Leiden, twenty miles from Blake’s childhood home in Rotterdam. During our time together, I felt that our shared language and origins created a certain intimacy. A Dutch-speaker who lives in a place where hardly anybody else speaks Dutch – as Blake and I had almost all our adult lives – can feel that he has a secret language, a distant perch from which to regard others. When you meet a fellow Dutch-speaker, that distance shrinks. This intimacy was exciting but also worrying: I didn’t want to be seduced by Blake.

* * *

Blake’s story is now known only to a few people, and then only insofar as anything can be known for certain in the world of deceit that is spying. There are still many mysteries about him. MI6 has never made its files on him public. Perhaps it never will, because his case was so embarrassing to the service.

In addition, Blake was a hard man to get to know. He had been something of a loner since childhood, and during his decade as a Soviet mole he appeared friendly but distant even to his wife. Many traitors present in this way. Donald Maclean’s wife, Melinda, told her mother, ‘Maybe you can be married to a man for a long time and really never know him at all.’¹⁴ Philby’s third wife, Eleanor, wrote apropos of him that ‘no one can ever truly know another human being’.¹⁵ (On the

other hand, Guy Burgess, when drunk, had a habit of boasting that he was a Russian spy.¹⁶⁾

Blake, during his years as a double agent, was living under two layers of subterfuge. On the surface he was pretending to be a British diplomat rather than a British spy; and beneath the surface he was pretending to be a British spy rather than a Soviet one. He must have been always on his guard. Then, in jail, he was always secretly plotting his escape. Certainly until he broke out of the Scrubs, aged forty-three, only his mother, Catharine, seems to have known him well. No wonder that descriptions of him by people in his orbit ranged from ‘pleasant’ to ‘charming’ to ‘boring’.

The only way to understand a supremely international man is to use international sources. Because Blake emerged from anonymity in 1961 to disrupt the British national narrative, it has been mostly British writers, using British sources, who have tried to explain him. That approach doesn’t work for Blake. He was fond of Britain (or ‘England’, as he always called it), but not obsessed by it. The longest spell he ever spent there were his five years in Wormwood Scrubs.

In this book I have supplemented earlier accounts of Blake’s life, and my interview with him, with Dutch, German, French and Russian sources. Blake seems to have felt freer giving interviews in languages other than English, because he didn’t have to worry about the publicity bothering his family in Britain.

I also drew heavily on the Berlin archive of the Stasi, the East German secret police. Archivists sent me thousands of pages of material on Blake (including, oddly, many West German articles that East German spies must have clipped from the imperialist press). Between 1976 and 1981 Blake made at least four celebrity-spy trips to East Germany to meet and greet Stasi chiefs, and give lectures about his life to their staff.

In the Stasi's internal report on his visit to Frankfurt an der Oder in 1976, 'Comrade Blake' was praised for his heroism and his sense of humour.¹⁷ However, a Stasi officer who accompanied him on the visit noted that

externally he had nothing heroic to offer ... Small, very slim, almost frail ... slowly thinning black wavy hair, bearded ... A man who – as he assessed himself – feels mentally and physically young, who swears by yoga, yet who also appears old enough to his own eyes to have grown a beard, though as he told us, only after passing the age of fifty.¹⁸

Blake's 1980 and 1981 lectures in East Germany were filmed. They make for wonderful period pieces. At the 1980 event a retired senior Stasi officer introduces Blake to the audience as an agent who came to work for Communism 'without our intervention – one of those who, as we say, the dear Lord sometimes sends'. The audience duly guffaws. Then Blake steps onto the podium. His beard and pointy chin give him a touch of the devil, but he is typically well dressed in a dark suit with a waistcoat – possibly the remnants of his pre-1961 British wardrobe that his mother had brought to him in Moscow. Standing before a large East German flag, he tells the story of his life in fluent if Dutch-accented German. The senior East Germans, all men in ties, sit in a long row, looking solemn and bored; there is occasional whispering and nose-picking. Bottles of beer sit tempting but unopened on the table beside them.¹⁹

What Blake said behind closed doors to fellow Communist spies adds new detail to his story. However, nothing in his Stasi lectures contradicts what he wrote in his 1990 autobiography (published at the peak of Soviet *glasnost*), or what he told me

in 2012, or what his lawyer said at his trial in 1961. All his life the story Blake told about himself remained fairly consistent. He was a traitor, but I don't think he was a liar.

In this book I want to try to make sense of Blake's life. I also want to understand how, in old age, he looked back on it all. The little man I met in his dacha was a leftover from the Cold War. But he was also a harbinger of a twenty-first-century phenomenon, the 'foreign fighter': the westerner who sacrifices everything in a deadly struggle against the West. And his story prefigures Russia's hacking of the West during the Trump years. Blake betrayed western secrets and several hundred British agents to the Soviet Union. Dozens of those agents are presumed to have been executed. This intelligent, amiable, apparently well-meaning man then had to live with himself for decades afterwards. Who was George Blake? What impact did he have on history? And did he have any regrets?

An Ordinary Dutch Boy

Settling beside Blake on the sofa in the conservatory, I asked him what he missed when he thought back to his Rotterdam childhood. ‘Well, of course I miss my parents,’ he said, ‘in the first place my mother, to whom I was very attached and who also loved me a lot and whose character I inherited.’¹

He was born in the Dutch port city on 11 November 1922 – Armistice Day. His father, Albert Behar, a Jew from a wealthy family in Constantinople, had served in the French Foreign Legion and the British army in the First World War. A driver and motorcycle despatch rider on the Western Front,² Albert had been left with deep scars on each cheek from flying shrapnel, and bad lungs from a gas attack.³ A month after the Armistice, the army posted him to Rotterdam to help repatriate British prisoners-of-war. There he met Blake’s mother.⁴ Blake would reflect in adulthood: ‘If the Archduke Ferdinand had not been shot, I would not have been born.’⁵

At some point Albert Behar acquired a British passport, and so his son was born a British citizen.⁶ On the way to the registry office Albert experienced a burst of British patriotism

and decided to name the boy not Jacob, as he and his wife had agreed, but George – a name that Blake would always dislike and eventually ditch.

Albert doesn't seem to have transmitted any sense of either Britishness or Jewishness to his son and two daughters. During Albert's lifetime George never made the short journey across the sea to Britain. Albert himself would barely have known Britain. Nor was he at home in the Netherlands: he spoke hardly any Dutch, whereas his children, certainly when they were small, had little English. Blake's struggles to understand Albert's requests to him from his deathbed would stay with him forever. They may have inspired his later frenzied learning of languages.

George Behar never became a Dutch citizen but was raised 'as an ordinary Dutch boy',⁷ under the aegis of his upper-middle-class Dutch Protestant mother, Catharine Beijderwellen. The family lived in a little street in Rotterdam's old city centre. He was known at home not as George but by his Dutch family nickname, 'Poek'.⁸ As late as 1967, writing a letter to tell his mother that he had escaped from his British jail, he signed it 'Poek'.⁹

After Blake was unmasked as a traitor, journalists went in search of people who had known him in childhood. A picture emerged of a serious, polite, bright, conscientious, honest and rather solitary boy. Dina Regoort, who had worked as a maid in his mother's house, recalled young George, wearing a black dress and a black hat belonging to his mother, banging the table with a toy hammer as he pretended to be a judge doling out long prison sentences to Dina or his two little sisters, Adele and Elizabeth.¹⁰ Dina's sister Johanna, who took over the maid's job in 1938, remembered Blake as a talkative teenager: 'He loved imitating. He'd imitate Hitler and lawyers. He wanted to be a lawyer himself, he said, or a pastor.'¹¹ Sometimes

he would stand in front of a big mirror at home giving sermons to an imaginary congregation.¹²

As Blake later described it, he grew up in ‘bourgeois circles’,¹³ ‘conservative and, one could say, religious’.¹⁴ His first book was an illustrated children’s Bible,¹⁵ and he grew up obsessed with Bible stories. His career plan was to become a *dominee*, or Dutch Reform pastor.

‘You have strayed far from that path,’ I remarked.

‘I wouldn’t use the word “strayed”,’ Blake replied. ‘Let’s say I was sent from that path.’

‘Sent by what?’ I asked.

‘Sent by the circumstances.’¹⁶

Blake’s mother’s family were Remonstrants, a very liberal and generally posh variety of Protestants, who believed that not everything that happened was predestined by God. For Remonstrants the individual had room to exercise free will. But Blake as a boy embraced a sternly deterministic branch of Calvinism – one that, like his accent, has now almost died out in the modern Netherlands. He simply could not see how a human being could have free will. After all, God orders everything.¹⁷ Blake seems to have stumbled on this extreme form of predestination largely because, like many Dutch people of his generation, he grew up idolising the country’s royal family, the House of Orange. As this pious boy saw it, the royals followed a stern brand of Calvinism that left little space for free will.

In fact, his take on Orangeist religion was of dubious accuracy. He had probably absorbed it from Calvinist-nationalist children’s books. Regardless, in his childhood Blake developed religious opinions that ‘put me firmly in what is called today the fundamentalist camp’, he wrote in his autobiography in 1990. ‘My initial sympathies led to a genuine belief in predestination ... and later in determinism.’¹⁸

His royalism would endure to the end. When I asked him at the dacha to name his historical heroes, I expected him to come up with some pure-at-heart Communist believers like Rosa Luxemburg, but instead he said: ‘William the Silent, Queen Wilhemina, Catherine the Great here.’¹⁹ William the Silent led the sixteenth-century Dutch revolt against the Spaniards. Wilhelmina was the queen of Blake’s childhood, who during the Second World War broadcast to the occupied nation over Radio Orange from London. And on Blake’s kitchen table on the day we met lay a book (a present from Sauer) celebrating the then Queen Beatrix’s seventieth birthday.

Somewhere along the way Blake stopped believing that Jesus was the son of God. However, all his life he continued to believe in some kind of predestination. He said that the one prayer he for ever considered valid was ‘Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’.²⁰ His autobiography has the deterministic title *No Other Choice* and mixes spy yarns with dense Calvinist theological passages. In it he writes: ‘I believe it is justified for someone to say, “You cannot punish me for my sins because my sins were put inside me and are not my fault.”’²¹

But Blake didn’t believe that people should simply sit back and wait for God to reveal their destiny. On the contrary, they had to move fate along by taking action themselves.²² His deterministic worldview – the only one that would last his whole life – was to prove momentous when he came into contact with Communism.

Blake told me his memories of his father:

He had a little factory – gloves for the ship-workers of Rotterdam – and he left early in the morning, and only came home at about eight in the evening. Then he’d come to our bedroom and tuck us in and give us a goodnight

kiss, and that was really all we saw of him. And he wasn't healthy, because he had been wounded in the war – gas poisoning. So he never played as big a role in our lives as my mother.²³

In 1929 Albert Behar's business was shaken by the Wall Street Crash. In 1936, when George was thirteen, Albert finally succumbed to his chronic illnesses.²⁴ At this point the boy had never met his father's relatives. They had cut off contact with Albert after he married a gentile. However, it seems that Albert had told his wife that after his death she should ask his sister Zephira in Cairo for help. Catharine Behar did so. Zephira, who was married to a wealthy banker named Daniel Curiel, wrote back. Her letter included a piece of information that bewildered George: Albert had been Jewish.

This news shook George's self-image. Albert had long concealed his Jewishness. He had told the British army that he was Catholic, the Rotterdam authorities that he was Lutheran,²⁵ and presented himself in society as an Englishman, not a Jew.²⁶

There was a second surprise in Zephira's letter: she invited George to come and live with her family in Cairo for a few years.²⁷ Catharine, impoverished by her husband's death, accepted the offer. George himself was eager for an adventure.