

**EPISODE 505**

## [INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:00] AH:** Welcome to part two of a doubleheader released to coincide with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November the 9th, 1989. Part two, The Happy Traitor, a conversation on George Blake with Simon Kuper. He was a British intelligence officer, who was turned by Karl Marx after reading Das Kapital, that's led him to give up important operations, a host of MI6 agents, and a treasure trove of secret intelligence. George Blake was many things. He was a courier and Dutch resistance, and MI6 intelligence, officer, a language student at Cambridge, or vice-consul in South Korea, a prisoner in North Korea, and a hero returning to Britain in 1953. He would escape from a British prison after getting caught and would live out the rest of his life as the happy traitor in Moscow before dying recently. What did the author Simon Kuper think when he sat down to personally interview Blake before his death? Well, you have to listen to find out?

## [INTERVIEW]

**[00:01:05] KP:** Well, I'm really excited to speak to you about this book. George Blake is just such a fascinating figure. What led you to write this book?

**[00:01:13] SK:** Well, I grew up in Holland as Blake did. And about 20 years ago, I read an interview with Blake in a Dutch magazine. I remember it vividly. And here was this man who'd lived through and participated in some of the most amazing episodes of the 20th century. He'd been in the Dutch Resistance. He'd fled to London. Been in the Secret Service. He had been in the Korean War taken captive, Berlin in the Cold War. He was a British spy. Became a KGB spy. Jailed, escaped. And so just amazing story. And I was struck by things we had in common. Not that I'm a KGB spy. But we both grew up British in the Netherlands, I'm Jewish, he's part Jewish. There was a lot of sort of overlap. That's maybe a selfish way of responding. But that struck me. And I thought I'd love to interview this man one day.

And in 2012, when I was in Moscow, a mutual friends set us up. And I ended up with Blake stature. I spent three hours also with him. And I came away. I plan just to write a newspaper

article. I came away thinking, "Well, that's the most interesting interview I've ever done as a journalist." And a couple of years later, I decided I really had to try and turn it into a book.

**[00:02:24] AH:** I hope that's what you think of this interview. I know that in the past you've written about soccer. What led to the switch?

**[00:02:32] SK:** It's true that for years I wrote about football, and I've written football books. I've got another one coming. But I never wanted to be a sports writer. I'm very interested in it as I like to do it on the side. And happily, since 2010, my newspaper, The Financial Times, I've been writing a general column, much more socio political, not a sports column.

So sport was a kind of, let's say, cul de sac that I found myself stuck in for a long time as a journalist. I enjoyed it. But I definitely didn't want to just do that. And so the last decade or so I've managed to break out of that. And writing about Blake was part of that. I'm interested in many more things than just football. And I had to struggle with writing about a completely new terrain in this book, Espionage, which is something that I had not previously dealt with professionally before. And that's quite a lot of getting used to.

**[00:03:22] AH:** And most of the SpyCast listeners will know her George Blake is. But for those that don't, could you just give us a brief pen portrait of who this man was and why we're speaking about him?

**[00:03:34] SK:** Well, Blake was a British citizen. Grew up in Holland. During the war, he manages to get out of the Netherlands to London. Joins a Secret Intelligence Service, which later becomes a MI6, and he becomes a British agent. And the Brits posts into Korea. He's taken captive during the Korean War in 1950. And while in captivity, he reads Marx and he becomes a KGB. He decides communism is the right path. Makes contact with the KGB, and he becomes a KGB double agent.

Korean War ends. He goes back to Britain in 1953. The British still think he's working for MI6. And in fact, he's photographing documents every day and sending them to the KGB, giving them to his handlers on London street corners. And he continues this for eight years until the Brits finally bust him in 1961.

The main thing he gave away as a spy, apart from the names of hundreds of agents working for Britain, was the Berlin Spy Tunnel, which you and your readers will know is the spy tunnel that the Americans or British built under Berlin in 1954 or 5 to listen into Soviet phone conversations and telegraph messages. And so that is his kind of main period of action as a KGB agent.

**[00:04:50] AH:** We've actually got part of the Berlin tunnel here in the Spy Museum. So the next time you're in Washington, feel free to drop past and I would love to show you around.

**[00:05:00] SK:** I'll definitely do that. I'd love to see it.

**[00:05:02] AH:** One of the things that I find quite fascinating about Blake as the he's different from some of the other spies that many of our listeners will know about, people like Philby, people like Maclean, he wasn't of the same ilk, and he's probably not as well known. Like I just wondered, in the writing of this book and in speaking to Blake, were there things that struck you about Blake compared to these other figures?

**[00:05:29] SK:** I mean, the menu mentioned from the Cambridge 5, the Spy Ring established at Cambridge University in the 30s, whose members then go on to major positions in the British establishment who become very effective communist spies. These are gentlemen really. They are up cause figures who are really at the heart of the establishment.

And so when in the 50s and 60s, Philby, Burgess and Maclean are exposed spies, it's a great shock that people who were the epitome of one of us had actually been working against Britain. And it's led to a great fascination, because British readers are not so much interested in spies. They're interested in gentlemen British spies. So James Bond to Philby, those are the kind of stories that the British imbibe about espionage.

And John le Carré world that he describes is – I mean, that is the way it was in the 50s, 60s and 70s. MI6, in particular, is a very public school sort of club. Now, Blake in this world is an outsider. He's a very religious Calvinist in origin. And his father is a Jew from Constantinople, who had only become British because he'd fought in the British Army in World War I. So Blake is very much a foreigner. He speaks English with a Dutch accent. Lived in Britain very short parts

of his life. And while in MI6, was sort of seen as not one of us. He was respected for his languages. And he was sort of liked because he's a reasonably amiable figure. But he was very much an outsider, and he also felt to some degree discriminated against. But that is not why he spied against Britain.

Blake was also an Anglophile. Blake really loved Britain. Still did when I met him. He was not motivated by hatred of Britain or exclusion from the British upper class. He was motivated by his communist idealism.

**[00:07:18] AH:** And in the book you describe how Blake, when you met him, or as a figure, you found him simultaneously charming, but revolting. Could you speak a little bit more to each of those things that speaking to him drew out of you?

**[00:07:34] SK:** I mean, I have to admit that while I was sitting with Blake, I genuinely liked him. I mean, he's a highly intelligent man. He's not a sort of narcissist or a psychopath, I think. He is able to listen, and interact, and reflect on himself, and to some degree is able to self-criticize. And of course, he had this fascinating life, which he was able to describe very articulately.

So I have to admit, and this is something that journalists are sometimes guilty of, while I was sitting there, I was charmed by him. And it's only when I went back home, I flew back to Paris that night. I live here in Paris. And I told my wife about this astonishing man I'd interviewed. And she said, "Well, it sounds as if you've sort of fallen for a mass murderer." And, of course, she's absolutely right. And I reflect that in the writing of the book. This man is a serial killer. SIS estimated that of the hundreds of British agents he betrayed, about 40 were executed by the KGB and other recent European services.

So this, well-meaning idealists, because I think he sent 40 odd people to their deaths, and all in the cause of a murderous ideology. And so I wrestled with that in the writing of the book. I mean, I condemned Blake. But I have not managed as a person to dislike him.

**[00:08:50] AH:** That's fascinating. Could you tell our listeners a little bit more about the secrets that he betrayed? You mentioned some of the people that he betrayed. But what was his job? What was his access to secrets? How did he manage to do all of this?

**[00:09:06] SK:** Well, Blake was not as senior as Kim Philby. And a lot of what he was charged with in London and Berlin in the 50s was trying to recruit Russians as spies, which obviously is not a job that he did a huge amount of value for British spy services in his time. What he did was, at lunchtime, when the other spies would go out to the pubs and clubs at the west end, he would stay in the office, close the door, take out a micro camera that the Soviets had given him and photograph pretty much every document he could lay his hands on. So he didn't have access to the stuff that, say, Donald Maclean had in Washington during World War II. Maclean had the kind of negotiating positions of the UK and US to tell Stalin about Heaton. Maclean was one of the many people telling Starling that the Germans would invade in June 1941. Maclean told the Russians about the formation of NATO. So Blake didn't have access to that big stuff.

His biggest coup was in 1954 when the Brits and Americans decided to build the spy tunnel under Berlin. The secretary at the meeting taking the minutes unfortunately was Blake. And Blake immediately handed the documents to his Soviet handler, Kondrashov, who is very pleased. And so this portrayal of the spy tunnel is momentous. But it put the KGB in this insoluble position, this insoluble problem, which is, if they had immediately blown the tunnel immediately exposed it, the Americans and British would have known that there was a mole who had betrayed it. There was a strong chance they would identify Blake as that mole.

And so the KGB couldn't blow the tunnel without risking exposing. That pride agent who they were so proud of, it's so much to protect. And so the bizarre thing about the Berlin spy tunnel is it actually was a success for the West, because the KGB just let it operate for 11 months, because they didn't want to expose Blake. So the KGB didn't tell the Red Army or the GRU, the Red Army spies. They didn't even tell many other people within the KGB, "Look, this tunnel, the British and Americans have built this tunnel, and they are listening to all your communications from Berlin."

And so as a result, all the Soviet communications that Britain and America overheard for 11 months were genuine. There was no disinformation. They were getting the real stuff. And this was actually at a crucial juncture of the Cold War, because 5455 is about the most dangerous point in the Cold War. The Russians have the hydrogen bomb, and neither side really knows what the other is thinking.

And so the Americans are terrified, are the Russians going to suddenly invade? Are they going to do a Pearl Harbor on us somewhere? Or are they going to do worse? Hiroshima? Are they suddenly going to drop the bomb?

And so the big thing to know was do the Soviets have aggressive intentions? Who is this new man Khrushchev who's taken over Stalin? Is he a warmonger or a peacemaker? Nobody knows. They had no human intelligence anywhere near the Kremlin.

And so this Berlin spy tunnel is very important. And it's important because the stuff that they get from it, which is genuine, shows is banal. There is nothing interesting there. And that shows all the conversations they overhear about Russian officers talking about sex, or talking about the incompetence of their superiors, they never hear any signs of troop movements, or were planning to blow up New York or anything like that. And so it's very reassuring at this most dangerous points of the Cold War, the Spy tunnel reassures the west the Soviets are not about to invade. And bizarrely, had Blake never existed, and the allies have built the spy tunnel, the outcome would have been the same. So he did not manage to destroy that hugely useful communication device.

**[00:12:53] AH:** Tell us how the net closed in on Blake. How was he discovered? Was there a mole hunt? Was he betrayed by someone?

**[00:13:01] SK:** Most of it comes down to this Polish defector who you'll know about, Michael Goleniewski. There's a book actually coming out about Goleniewski this year. Goleniewski is a very bizarre character. He has this handlebar mustache. Later in life when he has a safe house in Queens, New York, he will start to claim that he is the last of the Romanovs. That he's the Grand Duke Alexei, and he therefore should be the heir to the Romanov fortune. So he's a bit of a chancer.

But anyway, he starts to write in the late 50s. He writes anonymously to the Americans and says, "Look, I'm an Eastern European spy. And I'm going to give you a lot of information about moles that the Soviets have planted in western spy services."

So he writes his letters in German. Originally, nobody knows who he is. And these letters give a lot of information about moles in the British spy services. And the evidence starts to point to Blake. And so, thanks to Goleniewski, and then this kind of low-level double agent in Berlin who'd worked with Blake called **[inaudible 00:14:05]**. The British eventually recognize we have a mole, which they'd originally tried to deny, and the mole is most probably Blake.

And so in 1961, just as Goleniewski has defected to the west with his East German mistress who doesn't know either his name or his profession, the net closes on Blake. And the SIS station chief in Beirut, where Blake is at that point studying Arabic, Nicolas Eliot, arranges to bump into Blake at a showing of Charlie's Aunt, a play at a local theater. And he says, "Oh, Blake, they want to see you in London about a promotion." And he doesn't know where the Blake really believes him, as Blake got a sense that something's going on. And Blake, of course, is suspicious. He thinks maybe they've caught me down. And he thinks, "Well, what can I do?"

He has this wife, Jillian, who's very straight arrow. She herself was in MI6. That's where met her. All the secretaries were posh young ladies. And she's a British Patriot. She wouldn't take kindly to hearing that her husband is a KGB spy and has a defect. And they have two sons, small boys and a third on the way. And so Blake, he doesn't want to say to Jillian, "Look, darling, I'm a KGB agent, and we better defect through Syria to the Soviet Union."

And so he speaks to a Soviet handler on an empty Lebanese beach, and the handler checks things out and comes back and says, "Look, the British don't suspect you. It's fine. You can go back to London. They're probably just giving you a promotion."

So Blake flies back to London as to 1961. And he arrives at St. James where they have an office. And I said to him, "What did you feel at the moment you arrived at St. James's?" And we've been speaking Dutch, because he was very keen to speak Dutch. He never got the chance. But he broke into English and he said, "The game is up." And he's met by this man, Harry Shergold. He's a kind of legend of MI6. Shergy as he was known. And Shergy says to Blake, "George, nice to see you. We have a few questions arising from your work in Berlin." And he starts to walk him across St. James's Park, to Cadogan Square. Cadogan Place I think it is, where Blake had worked in the 50s, the head office. And Blake realizes we go into head office

because that's where they can record the interrogation that they're going to do. And so it proves. Blake is interrogated for three days. Originally denies.

But when Shergold says to him, "Look, it's not your fault. You know you had to do it. You were tortured in North Korea, and they made you do it." Blake is very upset because he fancies himself as an ideological spy, which he is. He can't bear the thought that anyone suggests that he spied for non-noble motives. So suddenly he burst out, "No! I spied because of my beliefs in communism. I wasn't paid for it. Nobody made me do it. I spied out of conviction." And his interrogators can't believe it, because he has incriminated himself when they were probably about to say, "Best that you shuffle off on a plane to Moscow. We never want to see you again."

**[00:16:55] AH:** Around this time period, you mentioned Beirut there. Is there any overlap with Kim Philby? Blake and Philby ever overlap or know of each other before they end up in Moscow later on?

**[00:17:08] SK:** No, it's a remarkable coincidence that they're both in Beirut. I mean, Philby, by the early 60s, the Brits had a fair sense that he may well be a Soviet spy. But because he was a chum, is one of us, nobody wants to be too harsh on him and there was no actual proof. So he was allowed to go to Beirut as a newspaper correspondent, which I think was probably quite a nice gig, speaking as a newspaper journalist.

So there's this weird kind of parallel between 1961. Elliot persuades Blake to fly back to London, where Blake is interrogated, confesses, and is jailed for 42-year sentence. And 1963, when Elliot comes out to Beirut, meets Philby. Very similar situation. Says, "You know, Kim, you and I, we've been friends since our youth. I believe you're a Soviet agent." And Philby is allowed to do a fade and to disappear from Beirut to the Soviet Union.

Blake was not handled so generously as Blake would later complain. But no, Philby and Blake didn't know each other in Beirut. They got to know each other in Moscow. Where they got to know each other about as well as each man's natural secrecy would permit. And they became quite chummy for a while. Blake George and his wife introduced Philby to his last wife, Rufina. But then the couples eventually fell out in the 70s. Our photographs that Philby's son, John, took

at the Blake stature, which was then published in the British press. Blake's were outraged by this. And Phil, we thought, they shouldn't unwind. And so they never spoke to each other again.

**[00:18:35] AH:** Wow! And another couple of people that you mentioned that you mentioned in the book are Alfred Hitchcock and John le Carré. Could you just touch upon both of them and their relationship with Blake?

**[00:18:45] SSK:** Yeah. I mean –

**[00:18:46] AH:** I don't mean in the sense of direct relationship. Just that Blake was like an enigma for them and someone that interested them.

**[00:18:54] SK:** So Blake is jailed in Wormwood Scrubs, the London prison in 1961. And in 1966, he escapes, and it's spectacular. An Irish former prisoner throws a rope ladder made of knitting needles over the wall, and Blake jumps down, breaks his wrist. Hides in a bed set. He's held by pacifist, smuggled to East Berlin and pops up in Moscow. So it's just a spectacular escape. Leaving his wife and three sons behind expecting never to see them again. And Hitchcock loves this story. He's fascinated by it. He buys the film rights to book and to a couple of books. And he spends the last decade of his life in LA trying to turn Blake's escape into a movie. I think originally with Sean Connery and **[inaudible 00:19:34]** and they appear on the promotional poster.

Unfortunately, Hitchcock is going into decline. He's becoming senile, all sorts of ailments. And just before he dies, he gives up. His past it. And so he dies in 1980. And the film is never made. But the script is ready. So if anyone wants to turn Blake's escape into a movie, Hitchcock has written the script.

And then there's John le Carré. Now, John le Carré, David Cornwell, is in training in 1961. He's just completed training in MI6. When the head of training, Robin Hooper, calls them all together and says, "I regret to inform you that a man named George Blake has been exposed as a Soviet agent." We will now have to investigate who among you has had their identity blown and can no longer work as a spy and who is still okay." And then Hooper burst into tears.

So it's quite a dramatic moment for the young le Carré. And le Carré spends his career fascinated by the two fingers of Blake and Philby. Philby, I think is mostly the model for Bill Hayden. And, I mean, le Carré doesn't meet either of them. But Blake becomes transmuted into the figure of Alec Leamas in a *Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. Leamas is also suspected to be a Soviet double agent. And like Blake, also grew up in the Netherlands. German speaker grew up in the Netherlands. So he has biographical similarities to Blake.

I knew that le Carré was fascinated by Blake all his life. So through a mutual friend, I sent him the manuscript, because I wrote the book. Finished about three or four years ago. The agreement was it could only be published after Blake died. So I sent it to le Carré, and he read it and wrote a nice email about it. And sadly, he died about two weeks before Blake did.

And after his death, I had delicate negotiations with le Carré agents about which bits of the email that le Carré were agreeable to use as a blurb. But I'm very happy that he was able to read it.

**[00:21:30] AH:** The Escape from Wormwood Scrubs, tell us a little bit more about that. You mentioned the Philby got in the back door and told to kind of disappear. And that could have happened to Blake, but Blake incriminated himself. Do you detect the hand of British intelligence and has escaped from Wormwood Scrubs? Or would that just have been a propaganda on goal? I mean, it just seems bizarre the someone that got the heavier sentence up until that point in British history just managed to like get out and such a keystone cops kind of fashion.

**[00:22:07] SK:** Yeah, well, when he escaped, many people thought, as you did, that British intelligence must have let him go. This was a popular conspiracy theory at the time. The KGB also seems to believe him. So when he pops up in Moscow, they don't trust him because they thought, "Well, MI6 has probably unleashed him on us."

The truth does seem to be, to use a Britishism, just a series of cockups. It was incredible incompetence. And this was not alone. The reason I'm confident in saying that it was just a cockup, a screw up, is because everyone was escaping from British jails in the 60s. I mean, you remember the great train rollers. A couple of them escaped. There were many people from Blake's own prison, Wormwood Scrubs, who'd escaped. It wasn't even very difficult. I mean, he

got a burglar on the inside to break a window. He got to the outside wall. He'd arranged with Sean Bourke who he knew from prison who'd being released recently. They'd each had a walkie talkie. And Blake essentially just – He wants to climb down the rope ladder, but Bourke had thrown it up forgetting to give him anything to fix it to the wall with. So he has to jump down the wall, breaks his wrist.

But yeah, I mean, it's just one Irish petty criminal and two peaceniks, members of CND, I think, who had previously been arrested for trespassing on US military property. Had met Blake in Wormwood Scrubs and agree to help him out of conviction. One of them, Michael Randall, still alive. Just published a book about him has just appeared. And so these three men acting out of conviction found it actually quite easy to get him out.

In the end, Blake hid in one of the peaceniks flats in **[inaudible 00:23:32]** in Hamstead for a few weeks. And then Michael Randall creates a secret compartments at the bottom of the van. He scraped out a secret compartment. Blake hid it, and Randall and his wife and their two young sons went on a supposed holiday to Berlin. They drove the camper van to Dover. Got on the ferry to Calai. And before you know it, Blake is walking up to a border guard in East Berlin. So the amazing thing is how simple it is.

Simon Gray in his play about Blake and Bourke has a character say, "But that's like something out of a comic book." And it is like something out of a comic book. I can also totally see why Hitchcock wanted to make this movie. It's just a fantastic scene.

**[00:24:11] AH:** One of the things that I found that interesting in your book was that Blake was rather an unusual prisoner. Wasn't he in certain ways? When you see movies or TV shows of Britain in the early 60s, it's a rather grim looking place. But George Blake was a rather unusual prisoner practicing yoga and things like that, right?

**[00:24:32] SK:** Yeah, I mean, for the first time in his adult life, he's able to live at himself, because he's not a spy. He's not a double agent anymore. Everyone knows Blake is a communist and a KGB agent. So there's no more secrets about him. And then he reveals himself as a very sort of charming and helpful man who becomes a kind of prison professor. He's one of the few educated people in the scrubs.

And so he gives language classes. He teaches French, German and Arabic to these often young companies who barely been to school. He writes letters for them to the authorities. He always has time to listen to other people's problems. So he becomes a kind of guru of many people in the scrubs. The wardens admire him. He's liked by everyone in the prison.

And yeah, he can stand on his head, I think, for 15 minutes. And he was keeping himself in good shape. Because secretly all this while he was plotting an escape. But he was very much sort of the hero of the prison. And when he escapes, the night he escapes, when the prisoners find out, there's this long chant of, "George Blake, George Blake." Everyone's delighted that he's gone. Even some of the wardens seem quite chuffed.

**[00:25:33] AH:** So there's no kind of animus that's directed towards him because he betrayed Britain?

**[00:25:39] SK:** I didn't hear anything like that. No. And even there was one far right figure, kind of the cossi in jail, sort of Posh-Britain who got himself into various kinds of trouble. And so of course he was far right, but he very much liked and admire Blake as well. I mean, he said Blake was ruthless. But I think people will also just charmed by Blake's intelligence and courtesy.

I mean, I also think that Blake, and this is something that I think a lot of people struggle with, because he was a traitor, because he did such damage to the UK. I also think that Blake was actually a well-meaning bloke who actually wanted to help other people. The fact is that he chose the wrong cause, communism. But in jail, I think he was a genuinely charitable figure.

**[00:26:21] AH:** Tell us a little bit more, Simon, about that conversion of George Blake. Help us understand what's going on. Whereas you mentioned that he reads marks. Is there any indoctrination that takes place? Or is this all come from his own agency? When did the KGB get involved? Walk us through that conversion of George Blake a little bit more.

**[00:26:43] SK:** Well, in 1950, the North Koreans invade Seoul, where he's working as a British agent. And they arrest him and a couple of other British diplomats. And they take him on this horrendous death march with various nuns and monks and other clerics missionaries in Korea

and with American prisoners of war, and hundreds of people die. And meanwhile he's watching American bombers destroy Korean villages. I mean, the carnage of the Korean War, of course, is gruesome. The infamous US General Curtis LeMay says, "We killed, what, 20% of the Korean civilian population."

So he's in this hellscape watching all this. And finally, a group of 10 British and French prisoners, mostly diplomats, and journalists end up in this quiet farmhouse in North Korea for two years. And they've got nothing to do there. Bored out of their mind. They tell each other their life stories. And then they have to start telling their life stories again. So amidst this tedium and this kind of am I going to survive the Korean war issue that they all thinking, these parcel of books arrived from the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang, and there are three books. Only one in English, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. They're all hugely excited. They draw lots about who gets to read it first. They read it to pieces. And there are two books in Russian. Translation of Marx's *Capital* and Lenin *State and Revolution* in Russian. And there are only two Russian speakers in the group. Blake has learned Russian in a year at Cambridge. The SIS sentenced you. And the British consul in Korea, Vyvyan Holt, reads Russian. So they sit on a grave hill and they read *Das Kapital* in Russian twice. Not many people have done that. And they discuss it. And Holt, who's an old sort of British imperial civil servant says to Blake, "Look, I don't like communism, but I think it's going to triumph. I think communism is the future." And Blake's very influenced by that. And Blake grew up on the Bible, on the idea of a paradise in the afterlife, where everyone is equal. Where there is no material display. Where we live kind of humbly, but beautifully. And he reads Marx and he thinks, "Well, Marx is the same thing. Marx is a kind of Christianity on Earth, a Christian paradise on earth."

And he thinks, "Well, here I'm in Korea. I'm 28. I might well die in Korea. And I want to die for the right cause. I don't want to die for the cause of the Americans bombing Korean villages. I believe communism is the correct path." So he goes up one night to the North Korean camp guard, whom the prisoners called Fatso, and he gets Fatso a note in Russian for the Soviet embassy.

Soon afterwards, a KGB agent called Nikolai [inaudible 00:29:12] arrives at Mampo, at the farmhouse, interrogates all the prisoners, of course, with special attention to Blake. Is eventually persuaded that Blake is the real thing. He's not some British plant, because he asked Blake to

write out the structure of SIS, as Blake knows it, and Blake describes the structure of SIS, and it matches exactly with the structure of SIS that the Soviets had got from Kim Philby. So then they know they can trust Blake. And they recruit him as a KGB agent in 1951.

Spring 1953, after Stalin's death, Blake and the other prisoners are returned to Britain. And that's where he starts his work. But really, it's the reading of Marx and the meshing of his Calvinism with a new communism that does it.

**[00:29:53] AH:** Wow! I've read Das Kapital once in English, and it's not an easy read. I'm just thinking the world could be very different if the US Embassy had sent through a copy of the Wealth of Nations or something like that.

**[00:30:05] SK:** It's true. I read the Communist Manifesto, but it didn't somehow convert me.

**[00:30:10] AH:** Another thing that I find quite interesting about him is how he gets put back into work. He comes home. Tell us a little bit more about his reassimilation and then him being put to work by British intelligence but actually he's simultaneously been put to work for Soviet intelligence.

**[00:30:31] SK:** Well, he and the other release prisoners landed the RAF base in Abingdon in April 1953. And as they walk off the plane, as cheering crowd, including Blake's mother. His real mommy by all his life. And they're greeted as heroes. Is interviewed on the BBC. There's footage of him trying to speak in a sort of Cambridge accent. "The food was adequate," he says. So he speaks in his kind of mid-50s posh accent that he's learned. And meanwhile, he looks at the crowd and he thinks, "Well, they don't know that I am no longer the person they think I am," because he has become a Soviet spy.

And he goes to SIS head office in London. And you'd think the SIS would be suspicious because there have been a lot of talk of brainwashing by North Koreans. Fact, the North Koreans had tried to indoctrinate the prisoners. But their attempts were so clumsy and cack-handed that the prisoners had to actually correct their quotations of Marx, because the Koreans were not very well upon Marx it seemed.

So SIS should have a suspected Blake. This is also just two years after Burgess and Maclean have defected to Moscow. And yet the debriefing of Blake in London is extremely cursory. It's just, "Good to see you back, George. Go on holiday. And we'll see you after the summer. Well done." And no suspicion that he might have been tapped while in Korea.

And he has his first meeting with the Soviet handlers by his own requests in his native Netherlands, because he feels most at home there. He feels he'd be able to see if anything was wrong. And he meets a Soviet handler in the hay on a park bench. And as they leave, as they get up to go, Blake points to the newspaper story. They're both carrying a newspaper, as the famous spy sign of greeting. And the newspaper story on the front page of the Dutch newspaper is barrier unmasked as British agent. And this is of course, in the post-Stalin sort of meltdown.

And the Soviet handle doesn't comment on this. But then Blake goes back to London. And he has a series of drops where he meets his handlers, most of all, Sergei Kondrashov at the top of a double decker bus on a deserted station platform at 9pm in a cinema, Misty Street corner in Belsize, Park. Very much kind of spying wire. And giving them all this stuff. And the Soviets realized very quickly, "Wow, he's really giving us the best stuff. He's not a plant."

**[00:32:52] AH:** That was one of the questions I was going to ask actually about who his handler was. We know figures like Yuri Modin. One of the handlers for the Cambridge 5. Writes the book *My Five Cambridge Friends*, and then Gordon Lonsdale, **[inaudible 00:33:05]**. He's the handler for people in the Portland Spy Ring. I was just going to ask us about more about her that handler was. Was he one of these legendary Soviet handler type figures? Or give us a little bit more information on him.

**[00:33:21] SK:** So his first KGB handle is Nikolay Roden, who's also known as **[inaudible 00:33:25]**, who's an intelligence legend, who'd also handled the Cambridge spies. One of the few survivors, I guess, of somebody who'd been in foreign intelligence and survived the Stalin purges. And so sometimes he'd asked, "**[inaudible 00:33:37]**, what do I do if the Brits catch me? Should I try and turn the trial into a political demonstration?" And **[inaudible 00:33:43]** never wanted to talk about that. He said, "Nothing will go wrong. Don't be weak," which was not very helpful when Blake was caught.

And his most sympathetic second handler was Sergei Kondrashov. Kondrashov actually came from quite a bourgeois family, which he had managed to keep secret when he joined the KGB, but was always very anxious that the KGB would find that out about him. And Kondrashov spoke languages and to his great excitement had been sent to England, where he dressed up as a kind of British gentleman. He was very much into that. And he had been sent more or less specifically to handle Blake, who is this great prize. His day job was kind of escorting Soviet chess players and other visiting dignitaries around London. But his real job was babysitting Blake.

And there's one point where Blake doesn't show up for the arranged meeting. Then doesn't show up for the backup meeting. And Kondrashov lives in this terror in which he says, "Only a mother or a spy handler could feel." And then the third meeting in the cinema happily, Blake does turn up.

And they have this kind of beautiful friendship. And later when they're in Moscow in old age, they remain friends sort of until Kondrashov's death in about 2006. So it's a beautiful story of a spy friendship.

**[00:34:52] AH:** Let's the jump cut forward to George Blake and Moscow. So he escapes Wormwood Scrubs, get sent East Germany and ends up in Moscow. Tell us about that latter chapter of his life. I guess a lot is happening there, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Berlin Wall coming down. The rise of Putin. A lot is going on. Tell us a little bit more about that chapter of George Blake in Moscow.

**[00:35:20] SK:** Well, he arrives in Moscow at the sort of beginning of 1967. And this is a man who sacrificed his family, expects never to see his wife and his three sons again, for communism. Communism is the cause to which he's given his life. And anyone who arrives in Breshnev, Moscow in the 1960s discovers pretty much on impact that communism doesn't work. It's a disaster system. People are poor and hungry and suppressed. And Blake says he realized after a week, this thing doesn't work.

And the thing is that, for him, he's going to make a new life of it. He's going to be positive. And he's also a cosmopolitan. He speaks good Russian. He loves the Russian language. He loves

Russian culture. And so he never feels this is exile, which is what Burgess and Philby feel when they're in Russia. Philby kind of reading the Times and following the cricket scores. Philby was a Britain adrift in Moscow. Where Blake is a cosmopolitan who can adjust anyway.

So he makes a real go of Russian life. And he meets this woman, Ida, who becomes his new wife. They have a Russian son later in the 80s. His British sons get in touch and he reconnects with them. And they have a relationship until his death. And meanwhile, he hopes that Gorbachev will bring the communism with a human face that Blake dreams of. That doesn't happen. The Soviet Union collapses. He's worried that the Russians will extradite him to Britain. That doesn't happen, thankfully for him.

And he works for this rather pointless think tank. He becomes best friends with Donald Maclean and they become real soulmate. Maclean is also from a very Protestant family of Scots Presbyterians. And they're kind of both ideological spies. They see Philby as rather frivolous, thrill seeking figure. But they're serious communists.

And so he works for MMO, Maclean's think tank. And he spends the last decades of his working life really trying to solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem, which he does not manage to solve. But it's partly because, as a young man, he lived in his aunt's house, a Jewish home in Egypt. So he's seen that Jews and Arabs can live together and he wants to bring that back.

And towards the end of his life, he kind of loses interest in politics. He becomes cynical. He gives up on it. And he thinks Putin is terrible. The condition he set for my interview is that I wasn't to ask him about contemporary Russian politics, because Blake was a sort of peace loving Democrats at heart, strange as this may sound. He loathe Putin with cynicism. The kind of lack of ideals. But he didn't want to say that because he got his **[inaudible 00:37:48]**. And he and his wife got their pensions from Putin from the kind of KGB network. So he didn't want to talk about Putin. But he thought that was just terrible.

And so kind of all his ideals die. He gives up on them. But he lives, I think, quite a contented old age. And in fact, at the end of the interview, he asked me. He said, "Well, you've heard my story. Now, what do you think?" And I said I'm surprised. I had expected a more tragic figure." And he bursts out laughing. He says, "Ah! Tragic, I am not." And I said, "No, you're quite an amiable

bloke." And he said, "Yeah, I'm quite cheerful. I'm a happy man, and lucky. And many people will say, I don't deserve my luck. But I've had it. And here I am. And I'm very contented with my life."

**[00:38:31] AH:** Some people that listen to this, they may think Andrew and Simon are trying to dress up this guy and make it sound like he had this glamorous interest in life. He's basically just a scumbag who left his family high and dry. And he gets there. And within a week, he doesn't even believe in communism anymore. And then he pulls his punches with the Putin regime, because he's been looked after materially from them. How would you come back to someone that may be thinking that when they listen to this interview, or maybe you would agree?

**[00:39:02] SK:** I mean, I would agree with some of that. Look, there's no doubt that Blake's impact on the world was very bad, beside from the 40 or so people who were betrayed by him and executed by these Eastern European spy forces. There are many others who were sent to jail. We'll never know all their names. We'll never know the numbers of people whose lives he ruined and families who destroyed. But I think you have to slightly separate the effects of somebody, which in Blake's case, his effects on the world were disastrous from the intentions and from the personality.

And I think the tragedy of Blake in a way is that he was an idealist, and he found an ideal communism that he thought was so good for the world that it was worth some people dying for it. Although he himself, he was not a kind of violent man by inclination. And it's easy to say, "Oh, he didn't really believe it." I think he did. I think he really thought communism will bring a better world and some bad things might have to happen on the way. I mean, he always denied to himself that 40 people had been executed. He said it didn't happen, et cetera. It did.

But I've come to see him as a forerunner of today's Jihadi terrorists. And it's partly because I live in Eastern Paris every day on the way to my office. I cycle past the Bataclan, the musical where 90 people were murdered in November 2015 just as I was starting to write this book. And I think Blake had some similarities with them, and that they too believe that they will bring in paradise on earth, that this kind of Caliphate paradise was worth killing people for.

And Blake's story, to me, it's a kind of version of *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene's novel. And version of the Jihad is it's about the dangers of idealism. And I'm not an idealist. I believe in the least bad society. And I think it's lucky that in Western societies, we don't produce many idealists anymore. The kind of great ideals are behind us.

**[00:40:58] AH:** What was his relationship like with his sons that he left behind? They reconnect later on?

**[00:41:05] SK:** Yeah. So Blake's wife is quite a conservative figure. And when Blake legs it to Moscow, she marries another spy. And so they have a very happy, I think, second marriage, until the man dies later in life. And the sons are well-brought up and become quite conservative pillars of the establishment. One becomes a vicar, and other works in a bank, a third is in quite a posh regimen for a while. So they become very much British establishment types, not communist in any way.

But in the 80s, one of the sons in his 20s decides he wants to see his biological father. And he visits Blake in Moscow. Determined to dislike him. And he's churned by him. And he thinks this man is a good man. And he tells his brothers, "Look, you should really visit him as well." So the brothers begin to visit him. They reconcile with Blake. They don't endorse his communism in any way, or what he's done, but they love him as a man. And for the rest of his life, the sons continued to visit him and their children as well come to visit Blake in Moscow. And he told me that that was the happiest thing about his life, that he'd had a second family in Russia and had not lost the first family.

I read in the New York Times obituary, I don't know whether this is correct, that on his 90th birthday, in 2012, his ex-wife, Jillian, actually also came from Britain to visit him. These two very old people, it seems, had found some kind of peace with each other at the end of their lives towards the end.

**[00:42:33] AH:** and that the sons take has name?

**[00:42:35] SK:** No. They have the name of Jillian's second husband, I believe.

**[00:42:41] AH:** I got an interesting recording through from our contact in Moscow. And it was a leader who was George Blake. And some of the leading lights of Russian intelligence and espionage were there, and he was kind of almost given a bit of a hero standoff. So I just wondered if you could help us understand how much did he recant on his belief in communism and Marxism? Help us understand the politics and ideology of George Blake during the transition from the Soviet period to his death?

**[00:43:18] SK:** Well, first of all, I don't think it's a funeral Blake would have chosen to be buried as a Russian hero. He told me, "When I die, my ashes will be scattered in the woods behind my dacha, and then there will be nothing left of me, and there is no afterlife." And instead he's marched through this coffin by these masked soldiers at the height of the Moscow pandemic. And there are these kind of, as you say, Great nationalist speeches by Russian dignitaries about this man who'd been given the Order of Lenin, who is sort of treated as a Russian Hero.

What would Blake have made of it? I think Blake recognized that communism didn't work. But he was such an idealist that he said it was worth the experiment anyway. So maybe it will serve humanity in future centuries. And he sort of felt that it's worth pursuing ideals even if they fail. He was not somebody who believed in sort of gradual amelioration or the benefits of small victories. And so he recognized that communism had failed, but he thought that the attempt to try communism was a worthy one. And that I think was also how he made peace with himself. He was not a nationalist.

I mean, he'd grown up a Dutch nationalist. And when he left the Netherlands and eventually realized he was never going to return there, I think that opened up a gap in his mind for a new country to attach himself to, and that became the Soviet Union, I think more than Russia. So he identified the Soviet Union as the kind of fatherland of his ideals. Russia, to him – I mean, he kind of loved Mother Russia, loved Russian literature, the language, the Orthodox liturgy, but he didn't love the capitalist Putin era Russia, or he didn't love that version.

**[00:45:00] AH:** If a reader was to come to your book, what would they find out that wasn't previously out there already? I guess the interview with Blake would be part of that?

**[00:45:10] SK:** Yeah, I think I'm the only biographer of Blake who's actually interviewed him at any length. The other thing is that a lot of people have written about Blake from a kind of British perspective. And that doesn't work, because the man spent only about less than 10 years of his life in Britain. Most of that period in jail.

Blake was an international figure. Grew up in the Netherlands as a Dutchman. And I think I've been able to explain his background, his youth, his Christianity, and how that shaped him. The Dutch Resistance experience as the key to Blake. You can't come to Blake from a British perspective. You have to come at him from an international perspective.

So there's the meeting him, and there's the Dutch perspective. And the other thing is that the most valuable sources that I found on Blake are the stars he archives. He made four trips to East Germany to speak to the Stasi secret police from out '76 until 1980. And those speeches were recorded and videoed. And my degree was history in German. I speak German. So I use those recordings, which I think is a time when he's able to speak fairly freely about his life and give, I think, a fairly straight accounts of what happened in most cases.

And so that kind of very rich material, I think, is also, again, foreign material is crucial to understanding Blake. I've tried to approach Blake as an international figure, and not as somebody who kind of walks into the British story.

**[00:46:28] AH:** I think that that's a really good point, because so much books that look at British intelligence, it's very much written from Britain looking out on to the world with all of the cultural codes and mores already baked into the perspective. But this is a little bit more of almost like an international history of George Blake that you've written, which I really appreciate.

**[00:46:52] SK:** That also helped me see that contrary to what many people have said. Blake did not hate Britain at all. He actually liked and admired Britain. So when people have asked, "Well, why did like betray Britain? We must have hated Britain and he had animus against these establishments, against the upper class." Not at all. Blake was actually very fond of Britain. Britain just wasn't a huge part of his mind space. It's not the question that obsessed him. The question that obsessed him was communism was ideals. So Britain, as it were, was collateral damage of his idealism.

**[00:47:20] AH:** It's kind of incredible. Like you mentioned, it was a decade in Britain and more than half of that present jail. It's kind of incredible that he was welcomed into the bosom of British intelligence.

**[00:47:33] SK:** Yeah. Well, when he was exposed, Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister was asked this in Parliament, "How could a foreign born man be given such an important job in SIS? Isn't there a rule that your parents should have been born in Britain?" And Macmillan said, "Well, on that basis, neither Winston Churchill nor I would have been able to work for the British government." Both of them having American mothers. So in a country that even then had all sorts of international connections, it was very hard to enforce the kind of Brits only rule. And even that Brits only rule would not have worked very well if you look at the cases of Philby, Burgess, Maclean, Blunt and Cairncross.

**[00:48:09] AH:** Just to finish off, since you had the interview of George Blake, did you have any ongoing connection with him or correspondence with him?

**[00:48:16] SK:** No. What connection I had was carried out through a mutual Dutch friend in Moscow, **[inaudible 00:48:21]**. And originally, I hadn't planned to write a book. I'd gone there planning to raise a newspaper article. And I later felt the story was so compelling. And my access to him had been so good that I should turn this into a book. And when I told **[inaudible 00:48:33]** with Blake, who was sort of fine with it. And so as not to upset Blake's family, you don't like him written about in English. So he said to me, "Look, if you publish the book after he dies, then there'll be a lot of publicity anyway. His British family will have to deal with that. And your book won't make a huge difference to that." So that was agreed. I would publish when he died. And so when on boxing day, I got the call, George Blake has died. My sort of post-Christmas, New Year's somnolence was immediately broken. And I sprang into action updating the book, which was almost ready anyway. So my dealings with Blake were very much that one day, which I spend a lot of time since thinking about and reading up everything I could find about his life to help me put my time with him in context.

**[00:49:15] AH:** Well, I'm so glad that you've done such an enjoyable reading. So thanks so much for your time, Simon.

**[00:49:21] SK:** Thank you very much, Andrew.

**[00:49:23] AH:** Thank you.

[END]