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MIAMI HERALD
12 June 1985

FILE ONLY

West frees four, East releases 25 in big spy swap

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WASHINGTON — In a dramatic noontime exchange of prisoners on a Berlin bridge linking East and West, the United States Tuesday gave up three men and a woman it had indicted or convicted of espionage in return for the release of 25 people imprisoned on spying charges in East Germany and Poland.

It was "the biggest spy exchange in the history of the United States," said John K. Russell, a Justice Department spokesman. No U.S. citizens were involved.

Russell said that the 25 East bloc prisoners, whose names were not released, are East Germans or Poles who had been "helpful to American interests." Most of them had been recruited to work for the CIA, a source said.

Twenty-three of the 25 chose freedom in the West while two remained behind "out of concern for personal business and the welfare of family members," U.S. officials said in Berlin. However, the East German government agreed that those two would not be subject to further imprisonment and could leave for the West within two weeks if they wish, the officials said.

In addition, family members would be allowed to join the 25 released prisoners in the West. A U.S. official in West Berlin said he expected 15 to 20 family members to depart soon.

The four individuals freed by the United States were Marian Zacharski, 31, a Polish intelligence officer; Alfred Zehe, 45, a scientist from Dresden, East Germany; Alice Michelson, a 68-year-old East German teacher; and Penyu Baychev Kostadinov, 42, a former Bulgarian trade counselor.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said that President Reagan approved the prisoner exchange. The president pardoned Zacharski, who had been sentenced to a life term, and federal judges reduced the sentences of

the other three to make the exchange possible.

A U.S. official in Berlin said that the four prisoners had been exposed and "were no longer of espionage value to the East. On the other hand, the East's interest in obtaining their return made it possible for us to have 25 persons and family members released."

The official said that discussions with a representative of the East German government raised the possibility of the exchange and prolonged negotiations ensued.

During the bargaining, the U.S. government pressed for freedom for such Soviet dissidents as Andrei Sakharov and Anatoly Shcharansky, but "we were told that the Soviet Union would not consider their release," the official said.

The swap of spies took place under cloudy skies on the Glienecker Bridge. Representatives of East and West arrived with their prisoners aboard buses that were driven to a white line on the bridge that separates West Berlin and East Germany. There the deal was completed.

Several prisoner exchanges have taken place on the same bridge during the last 20 years. Perhaps the most famous occurred in 1962, when Francis Gary Powers, pilot of a U-2 spy plane downed over the Soviet Union in an embarrassing incident during the Eisenhower administration, was swapped for Col. Rudolf Abel, a leading Soviet atomic spy.