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# Moscow-death man 'knew of embassy spy'

By NIGEL WADE in Moscow

**MR DENNIS SKINNER**, the Midland Bank representative found dead after plunging from a Moscow apartment in June, gave a warning of "a spy in the British Embassy" two days before his death.

Mr Skinner, 54, had worked in Moscow since 1967 and was doyen of the British business community.

On the afternoon of June 15 he appeared at the door of a neighbouring British businessman, Mr Bill Cane, of Bank Xerox, and gave his wife, Mrs Vel Cane, a handwritten, foolscap note.

Mrs Cane told me yesterday: "It just said, 'I believe that when I go to the embassy this evening for the Queen's birthday party I will be arrested. Please go to the embassy for guards to be there in case I try to make a run for it'."

Mrs Cane continued: "The note said if he was arrested he would not get out alive. Then it said that there was a spy in the British Embassy and at the bottom it said: 'Please do this for me or I am a dead man'."

The apparent meaning of the letter is that he feared Soviets would arrest him as he went to the embassy reception and he was asking for British embassy people to have "guards", i.e. British security personnel, on hand to help him in case he managed to break away if arrested.

On the morning of Friday, June 17, foreign residents going to work heard a crash and found Mr Skinner's body on the ground beside his 16-storey apartment block.

A blue sweater was pulled over his head and the inside of his left trouser leg was torn.

### Window open

A Russian caretaker washing cars in the bright sunshine painted up to the writing room window of Mr Skinner's 12th-floor flat, which was swinging open in the breeze.

An inquest on Mr Skinner, which opened at Croydon two months ago, is to be resumed in secrecy for reasons which are believed to be connected with security.

Mr and Mrs Cane said yesterday they had sent statements to the coroner, through the British Embassy, and believed that the embassy had also forwarded Mr Skinner's dramatic note.

They said they were concerned at the time that Mr Skinner should be helped and had expected the embassy to put him on the first plane home.

He had a valid exit visa and a British Airways ticket for Monday, June 20, when he was

due to be in England for a business meeting.

"Either it was genuine or it was all in his mind," said Mr Cane.

"Either way, you would have to take it seriously."

Mr Skinner handed his note to Mrs Cane at about 3 p.m. on the 15th and Mr Cane took it directly to the embassy, where he was received by Mr John Burnett, the senior security officer.

Mr Cane said he pointed Mr Skinner out to Mr Burnett at the Queen's birthday party that evening and they had a talk.

When Mr Cane later asked Mr Skinner how he was, the banker replied: "We are not out of the woods yet."

Mr Cane said the embassy security official told him that Mr Skinner would be taken care of.

The next Mr Cane heard of him was when a colleague broke the news of his death on Friday morning.

It has since been established that the embassy arranged for Mr Skinner to stay the night of Wednesday the 15th at the flat of Mr Simon Butt, a second secretary.

### Attended reception

On Thursday the 16th he was interviewed by the British Embassy's second-in-command, Mr David Rafford, and Mr Burnett, of security.

He attended a reception for the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce at the Prague House restaurant on Thursday night.

About two hours before his body was found he made an

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early-morning telephone call to Mr. Ratford at his home, and again sounded to be in distress.

Mr Skinner was a solitary man. He had a Russian wife who was with him in Moscow for a time, but went to England about two years ago.

It was understood in Moscow then that this was for the benefit of their young son's schooling.

Mr Skinner's business card showed he was an MBE.

Mrs Skinner also has another son by a previous marriage, to a Russian. This son is also believed to be in England.

He was a member of the governing board of Moscow's Anglo-American school, but his friends were few, he seemed ill at ease in social company and colleagues recall him as depressed and lonely.

A fellow foreign banker said he often found Mr Skinner sitting at his desk reading a thick paperback, apparently because the banking business was so slow.

Members of the small British community in Moscow believe Mr Skinner may have developed some kind of persecution mania, but speculation continues as to whether he could have been involved in espionage and, if so, for whom.

"Whatever it was, to him it was real," said Mrs Cane. "He looked a very frightened man when he came to me."

The Canes were shocked to hear of Mr Skinner's apparent fall because they believed he was in the care of the embassy.

Mr Cane went immediately to the embassy and saw Mr Ratford and Mr Burnett.

#### 'Feared arrest'

He said he asked them how Mr Skinner had come to be back in his apartment unaccompanied.

"They said they had a long chat with him the day before and that, as he was afraid he would be arrested at the airport, he had thought it best not to change his travel plans in case this aroused suspicion."

Mr Cane said he asked if the embassy doctor was present when Mr Skinner was interviewed and was very surprised when he was told no.

"When I asked them why he was left alone, they said they had tried everything they could."

He stayed with Mr Butt on Wednesday night. On Thursday they had a long talk with him and he had suggested he should

carry on as normal until his planned departure on Monday.

Mr Cane said he was told that Mr Skinner did have "some problems and worries, but nothing abnormal."

Mr Cane was told that the embassy had offered to keep someone with Mr Skinner over the weekend, but that he had said it would be better if he went on in his own way.

Mr Skinner had expected to finish his Moscow posting last May, colleagues said, but this was later changed to September.

He represented I.C.I. the computer firm in Moscow from 1968 before changing to the Midland Bank in 1976.

In the past year or two he had given up alcohol and tobacco and become a jogger.

But some colleagues had heard that he had started drinking again and he had told some he was having trouble sleeping because he no longer smoked.

He was believed to be taking anti-smoking pills.

#### 'Talks with Ambassador'

Mr Nick Burton, formerly Mr Skinner's deputy in Moscow, and Mr John Segar, East European regional manager for the Midland Bank, arrived in Moscow in the week following Mr Skinner's death.

Several foreign businessmen have quoted them as saying they spent a total of 14 hours with the British Ambassador, Sir Iain Sutherland, in one of the embassy's "leak proof" secure rooms.

But Mr and Mrs Cane said the embassy did not tell the two bank officials about Mr Skinner's urgent note, which the Canes call "a cry for help."

Mr Cane said the bank men learned of the note by chance, near the end of their stay, from another British businessman resident in Moscow.

A neighbour in the bleak tower block where Mr Skinner lived said he met him coming back from a jog two or three weeks before his death and asked why he was not at work.

Mr Skinner replied that he had so little time left he had to make the most of it.

#### Foreign Office silent

OUR DIPLOMATIC STAFF writes: The Foreign Office reacted with "no comment" to questions about the Skinner case yesterday. A spokesman said because of the inquest the matter was sub judice.