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BRITISH WITHHOLD SPY CASE DETAILS

Mrs. Thatcher, Before Unruly Commons, Does Not Dispel Fear of Major Scandal

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

Special to The New York Times

LONDON, July 20 — Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher refused today to furnish details of Britain's latest spy scandal to an apprehensive and unruly House of Commons.

Mrs. Thatcher did confirm that 44-year-old Geoffrey Arthur Prime, who was arrested last week under the Official Secrets Act, had been an employee for nine years, ending in 1977, at the government's secret electronic eavesdropping center near Cheltenham in southwestern England.

She conceded that the charges against Mr. Prime, who speaks Russian, were "serious and must give rise to concern."

But beyond that the Prime Minister declined to go, asserting that under the law she could say nothing until legal proceedings against the suspect had been completed. The Speaker of the House, George Thomas, sharply limited questions despite the protests of backbenchers from several parties.

Mrs. Thatcher's comments did nothing to dispel reports that another major scandal — perhaps as embarrassing as the Burgess-Maclean-Philby affair of two decades ago — might be about to emerge.

Issue of a Spy Ring

She attempted indirectly to dampen speculation, which has filled the newspapers for the last three days, by asking a questioner that only one man had been charged, that he had not worked for the Government in any capacity for more than five years and that security procedures at Cheltenham had been thoroughly reviewed by an impartial commission last year and found to be adequate in every respect.

But the Prime Minister, pressed to comment on suggestions that a spy ring is operating at Cheltenham, avoided a firm declaration that Mr. Prime was working alone. "Absolute certainty is never possible in these matters," she said.

The effect of her statements, which came in the midst of continuing concern over security lapses at Buckingham Palace and on the day of two devastating bomb attacks by the Irish Republican Army in the center of London, was to keep the Prime Minister and her government on the defensive.

Mrs. Thatcher, politicians and analysts agreed, was able to do nothing to dampen the growing feeling that how great her triumphs in the Falkland



Associated Press

He is said to have been a linguist for the British Government.

Islands, things at home had been allowed to get badly out of control. That impression was heightened by the announcement of record unemployment figures.

The Cheltenham center, formally known as the General Communications Headquarters, works closely with the United States National Security Agency, based at Fort George Meade, Md. It is presumed here that some of the material allegedly passed along by Mr. Prime, probably to the Soviet Union, was American in origin.

British newspapers report that the secrets were passed to a Soviet contact who has left the country. Government sources were quoted as saying that no network and no "moles" remained in place at Cheltenham.

According to reliable informants, the Cheltenham operation employs more than 7,000 officers stationed around the world in such places as Scotland, Cyprus, Hong Kong and Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. They listen 24 hours a day to the radio, television and satellite communications of foreign powers and relay these to Cheltenham, where linguists and cryptologists study the intercepts for scraps of intelligence data.

The United States provides most of the money and technological expertise for the operation and the British provide most of the skilled analysts.

Mr. Prime, now a cabdriver, appeared at Hereford magistrate's court on a charge of violating Section 1 of the Official Secrets Act, which relates to the most serious spying. He was said to have communicated information of potential use to an unnamed enemy between January 1968 and December 1981.

Alex Lawrie, a Labor member of the Gloucestershire County Council, has added fuel to the controversy. An expert in African languages who formerly worked at Cheltenham, he said that security there was "lax and fossilized" — so poor that espionage was "child's play."

Gaunt Polyglot Cabdriver

Geoffrey Arthur Prime

Special to The New York Times

LONDON, July 20 — On the surface, Geoffrey Arthur Prime, the 44-year-old Briton charged with espionage, is a stark contrast to the other spies in this country since World War II.

Rather than attending Cambridge University, as did Sir Anthony Blunt, H. A. R. Philby, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess, Britain's best-known spies, Mr. Prime went to a small technical college in England's china-producing district, the Potteries, in Staffordshire.

Instead of serving in prominent public positions, like Sir Anthony, who was curator of the art collection of Queen Elizabeth II, or Kim Philby, who was once spoken of as a possible head of Britain's secret intelligence service, Mr. Prime has most recently been unemployed. Before that, he was a wine salesman and a taxi driver.

A gaunt-faced man described as a hard worker and good friend by a former colleague, Mr. Prime was charged at Hereford magistrate's court last Thursday with unspecified acts of espionage in the period from Jan. 1, 1968 to Dec. 31, 1981.

During the first nine years of that interval, he was employed at the General Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham. This is the nerve center of Britain's intelligence network, and it works closely with the United States National Security Agency.

He Worked Crossword Puzzles

Mr. Prime has been charged under Section 1 of the Official Secrets Act with communicating information calculated or intended to be useful to an enemy for purposes prejudicial to the safety and interests of the state. That section was used in all Britain's major spy cases.

"There's no doubt he is highly intelligent," said Glynn Friday, chairman of the Cheltenham-based taxi company, A2B Private Hire Ltd., where Mr. Prime worked for 18 months before leaving amicably last October. "Anyone who can do the Times or the Daily Telegraph crossword puzzles in 40 minutes must be."

The suspect, who is reported to have been a high-grade linguist for the Government's communications headquarters, was fluent in Russian and also knew German, according to Mr. Friday.

"He was very interested in Russian culture and was always reading Russian newspapers and books and going to Russian plays and films," Mr. Friday said.

According to his former employer, Mr. Prime said he was trained by the Royal Air Force at the Leachurst College of Languages. Today, a spokesman for the air force said he could not identify any such institution.

Mr. Friday was not surprised that his former employee had worked for British intelligence. "Taxi driver come in all kinds," he said. "Geoff led us to believe that the strain and stress of working for the Government for that sort of money he was making there was just too much. He told us he and his wife wanted an easier life so he left the Government."

Mr. Prime went to work locally at the taxi company, Cheltax, where today no one would comment on him. He moved to A2B Private Hire seeking more flexible hours, but when his freelance schedule there was threatened by changes in company policy he got a job selling wine to restaurants and hotels around Bristol, near Wales for the German wine company, Piesoth Ltd.

Mr. Prime was born in the village of Alton, near Stoke-on-Trent, not long before World War II. The youngest of three sons of a nurseryman, he went to a local Roman Catholic village school before going on at the age of 14 to study in Staffordshire. While in his 20's he is reported to have joined the Royal Air Force.

Divorced once, Mr. Prime then married a woman with three young sons. His wife, Rhona, the boys, and his parents are said to have been hiding for some days.

Mr. Friday described Mr. Prime's interests as soccer and reading. He said that since he was arrested on June 28 on three charges of indecent assault, Mr. Prime had lost considerable weight.

Mr. Prime is being held at the Gloucester Road prison in Hereford until his next court appearance, set for November, which will probably be at London's Central Criminal Court the Old Bailey.

"He was a bit of a loner" and didn't have much of a sense of humor, but he certainly got on well with his colleagues here," Mr. Friday said.

Czechs Bar a Polish Bishop After Visit to West German

MUNICH, West Germany, July 20 (Reuters) — A Polish bishop traveling home from West Germany was refused entry into Czechoslovakia by border guards today, the border police said.

The border police said the Czechoslovak guards tore a page from the passport of Bishop Bogdan Sikorski of Posen and refused him transit. A priest serving as the Bishop's driver was allowed through.

A police spokesman in Munich quoted officials on the West German side of the border as saying Bishop Sikorski had decided to return to Poland by air.