

When Leonid Finkelstein reached Whitehall he asked for political asylum. The officials just pointed him to a 77 bus, with directions for the Home Office

Defectors risk losing everything: family, friends, nationality, livelihood. And those with the courage to come to the West face a further danger – a death sentence in the KGB Search Book

DEFECTORS

I know a number of people in London who are sentenced to death. There are others who can look forward to, at the very least, 15 years of hard labour in Siberia. Their names, descriptions and presumed whereabouts are to be found in a top-secret publication, the KGB Search Book. This is where the Russian authorities keep a dossier on those who have defected. These include Alexander Dolberg.

A search warrant, it reads, is issued for Alexander Dolberg who was a member of the young Communist League: 'Dark haired and of small stature, he defected to West Berlin in 1956. In 1959 he left Munich for Britain where he now lives in London, systematically working for the BBC slandering Soviet reality.' Dolberg, wearing a striped jacket and flowery tie and looking every inch the mad professor, in fact is a translator and occasional journalist.

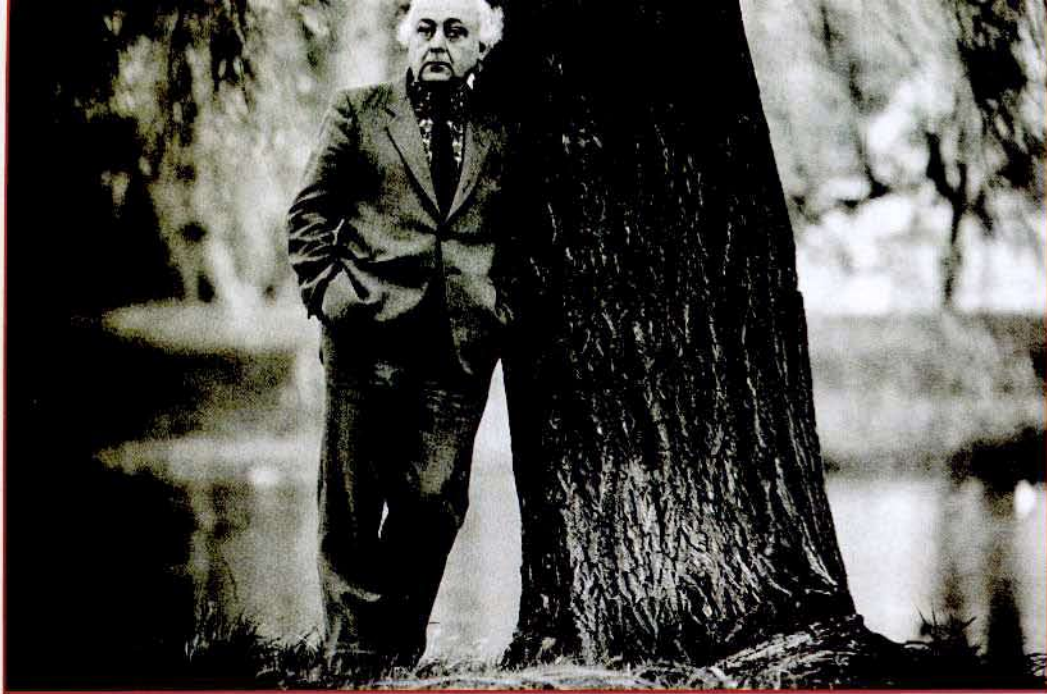
His file goes on to say that in 1956 the High Court for Criminal Offences of the Moscow City Judicial Chamber sentenced him to 15 years' work in labour camps. Dolberg, who is now grey and balding, looks understandably furrowed as he sits in Earl's Court, gesturing emphatically and appealing with his heavy-lidded eyes as he reads his sentence aloud. ('At least he knows his sentence,' defector Leonid Finkelstein exclaimed later, reading his own Search Book entry, in his North Kensington home. Finkelstein thinks *he* might be sentenced to death.)

This classified information came to Dolberg's attention through the combined efforts of a defecting KGB officer and NTS, a clandestine political émigré organisation based in South London, which helps Russians defect.

Fifty-four-year-old Dolberg, live-minded and determined, is one of a small number of Russian defectors who make it to England. Since 1979, defections have been recorded at about five a year; the effects of *glasnost* are still not clear.

But they don't like being called defectors. 'It's >

By Caroline Phillips
Photographs by
Mike Abrahams



Alexander Dolberg was treated with extreme hostility: 'I thought they were going to kill me'

◁ a derogatory term in Russian,' explains one. They prefer to be called non-returnees. 'Betraying the motherland' is the charge the state levels at these 'traitorous' runaways.

Defectors come from a cross-section of ages and occupations: Berezhkov was a 15-year-old who left his diplomatic parents for political asylum in the States, while Oleg Bitov was a middle-aged journalist and one of that rare breed who re-defect, generally claiming to have been drugged and kidnapped by imperialist intelligence services. More men than women defect, women being, arguably, more bound by emotional and family ties. But the one thing these people have in common is that they never tell anyone, not even their immediate family – who it is unlikely they will ever see again – of their plans.

Defectors tend to be paranoid, a state of mind bred by living in the Soviet Union where nobody can be trusted. They are private people who are supremely difficult to track down, frequently having changed their identities and countries. One, called Galina, would not reveal her surname or even tell me how she escaped. Another, Alfia, a celebrated cellist who defected on a cultural exchange six years ago, 'for religious reasons', adamantly refused to appear in print with other defectors: 'Their opinions are different from mine and could affect my relations in Russia.'

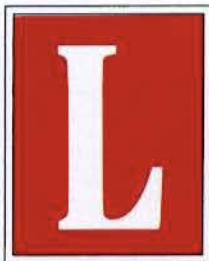
Oleg Chulkov, the merchant seaman who defected so dramatically in 1984 with his wife Irina stowed away in a 15-inch-high slot beneath his cabin bunk, vehemently declined an interview: 'We have had some unpleasant experiences in the past with the British sources of public information.' At the time, he regarded publicity as security against the KGB kidnapping them.

Defectors tend to be publicity-shy because they fear that something might happen to their relatives. More immediately, they live in fear of the KGB, a fear reinforced from time to time by

events like the murder of Bulgarian broadcaster Georgi Markov by an agent with a poisoned umbrella in London.

But Alexander Dolberg is not frightened, despite his KGB literature. 'It is a fantasy that they follow you in big black cars and grab you. They haven't done that since the 50s,' he says. Yet it is generally only the defectors who have been here for a long time who dare to speak.

Dolberg says he wanted to defect because he disagreed profoundly with the ideological dictates of the system. He knew that sooner or later he would go to prison for his disagreement, which he discussed openly with friends.



Life was dreary too, although in Russia he lived on the 'high edge of privilege' compared with his life now 'on the low edge of middle class'. His father was an economist working for the Ministry of the Interior and they lived in Moscow's equivalent of Eaton Square with more goods, prestige and privilege available to them than many others.

'But Russia is a place of scarcity, routine and drudgery, with queues for everything,' he says. 'You didn't have those now ordinary pleasures of nipping out to your local Chinese. And everything was difficult, from buying clothes to getting them dry-cleaned.' Friendships, however, he did value and deciding to defect was a painful decision, since he was close to his parents and grandparents. 'But I couldn't frustrate myself spiritually by staying.' He knew he wouldn't be capable of leaving once he was married, for the Soviet authorities practically never allow reunification of a husband and wife split by defection.

A series of lucky mistakes saw Dolberg, in 1956, on a cultural visit to East Berlin, one of the first-ever Soviet trips abroad. The students weren't even allowed to walk alone in the city. He knew he risked ten years' hard labour if he were caught escaping.

'I was scared I wouldn't have the courage when it came to the crunch and worried about after-effects,' recalls Dolberg, who considers self-obsession and self-regard predominant

traits in defectors. In a U-shaped art gallery, he gave his group the slip.

He ran into the Underground, clutching a passport, a volume of Pushkin's poetry, and praying there would be no spot-checks. Fortunately, he reached the American sector of Berlin. Dolberg then rushed to a police station. 'I was the first person from the Moscow intelligentsia, from the circle that became the Russian dissident movement, to reach the West.' There began his ordeal.

'I think the fact that I was multilingual made them deeply suspicious of me,' says Dolberg. He was treated with extreme hostility, bullied and taken blindfolded in a car with no inside handles. 'I thought they were going to kill me,' says this volatile character. He later learned it was simply a technique called hostile interrogation. 'I don't know why the intelligence services treat many people so badly.'

Six weeks in solitary confinement in a room with blacked-out windows followed. 'There wasn't even anything to read.' Daily a 'Mr X-ness' pushed him to divulge military secrets and confess that he was a spy. 'I knew nothing.' He does not think his experience unusual. They do the same today, but most people are too scared to talk. Bitterly, Dolberg thought he had reached 'freedom' and premature death at 24. He felt overwhelming despair. 'I sat on my bed and howled continuously like a dog.' Finally they released him.

His first pleasant experience of the West was a trip to C&A to buy a tie; he couldn't believe that there were no queues. In the following weeks he was struck, above all, by the movement and colourful diversity of life in the West. He made his way to a radio station where he began to write scripts. Three years later he got a scholarship to Cambridge University. 'I was still in turmoil and found the ritualised quality of life in England, its beauty and sense of tradition, very calming.'

He married an Englishwoman, but Dolberg has never been fully accepted by the West. Under the US Freedom of Information Act he obtained a copy of his FBI file, stamped 'secret' and heavily censored – 'Dolberg has not been able to establish his *bona fides* . . . there have been hearsay remarks with reference to his adherence to Communist principles,' it reads. He is, in other words, guilty until proved innocent. The FBI works closely with British intelligence. 'I can't get a job with the BBC Russian service – the only real outlet for a Russian journalist – because their journalists are vetted by MI5. I knew there would be hardship whether I stayed in the East or West,' says Dolberg, resigned to being a marked man on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

He now works as a translator, ironically the career that the Soviets had mapped out for him and that he was trying so hard to avoid. He is dissatisfied with his lot and misses Russia. 'I love Russia but dare not keep in touch with anyone.'

His love for Russia is echoed by another defector, 74-year-old Dr Anatoly Fedoseyev, a high-ranking military researcher who defected in 1971. He lives in Richmond, giving his address only as a PO box number. He is also sentenced to death. Multi-medalled, he had access to the highest echelons in Russia 'I had an ear on Brezhnev's problems.' An unusual man, he describes Richmond as 'not noisy enough' and, aged 73, travelled 10,000 miles around the States on Greyhound buses.

He wears a cloth cap, and speaks in halting ▷

< English. 'I like to talk. I am not a dissident and I did not hate Russia. Quite the opposite. I felt very bad about leaving. My roots are Russian.' He enjoyed good conditions, a remarkably free hand in his research—where he was head of a division of 450 people—and a high salary. 'I was in Star Wars before Reagan invented it.'

A month before he defected, he had been awarded the highest distinction in the Soviet Union, the Gold Star medal and the title Hero of Socialist Labour. He tells me that with pride. 'I felt terrible that they were showing their appreciation and I had to defect.'

'But I had to do it,' he says forcefully. He found himself guilty of anti-Soviet thoughts. He studied the system of socialism and concluded it was responsible for wastage and inefficiency. 'Socialism is a cage in which your hands are in chains.' (An avid *Telegraph* reader, he sent his plans for a new society to Mrs Thatcher – and received a letter of approval.)

'Because I was doing military research, I would have been shot as a state enemy if I expressed my views.' He endured five years of being constantly frustrated in his aims to visit overseas delegations and escape, for the KGB expressed fears that the West might try and kidnap him. 'I felt angry and disappointed. I began to think they would never let me out.'

Finally, he was allowed to visit an aviation exhibition in Paris. He had been assigned a general who slept in his room, followed him to the lavatory and shadowed him to buy a paper. Then one day the general instructed him to stay put while he visited another exhibition hall.

'As I saw him disappear, I began to tremble. My feet became woolly, my palms sweaty and my hands started to shake.'

With survival kit in hand – a portfolio containing two bars of chocolate and his documents—Fedoseyev went straight to the post office. He was anxious to contact his family before the authorities denounced him to them. Next he went to the British embassy where he underwent a rigorous debriefing procedure. Then he was transported secretly to England, put into a safe house in London and told not to talk to anyone who approached him.

He found it hard to integrate, but was delighted by some things. 'It was so odd not to have to carry an identity document. In Russia everyone carries one. I felt free and at ease at last. In Russia you always feel stressed. There is continual tension between your two personalities – the one that is talking along the lines of the state and the one inside that is really you.'

For Fedoseyev, who had resigned himself to labouring or washing dishes, things turned out far better than expected. He was given food and a flat then a job as a researcher at Cambridge.

Sixteen years later, Fedoseyev feels disenchanted. He sees signs of things that were happening in the Soviet Union, 'like rude service and queues', happening here. 'The working people have started to destroy society with their self-interest.'

Fedoseyev also feels very lonely. There is no real Russian community in England – and he finds the English unfriendly. He says he is happy in everything except his soul.

Sixty-three-year-old Leonid Finkelstein, who defected in 1966, provides a happy contrast. With his precisely defined features and *homme sportif* clothes (his KGB Search Book entry describes him as being *polni* (plump), of middle height and with a round face), he is a man who is at home in his



Anatoly Fedoseyev, 16 years in the United Kingdom, is still under sentence of death and still reluctant to show his face in public

modern des North Kensington res, where he lives with his second wife and son.

He resented the Soviet system more deeply than the others, he says (drawing on his Havana cigar), having uttered a reckless phrase to a friend who denounced him. 'Life was drab in Russia. Entertainment consisted of sitting around eating and drinking and cursing the Soviet powers with people you trusted.'

He was arrested and charged with spreading propaganda and inciting agitation and then spent five-and-a-half years languishing in labour camps. 'Fortunately only one of them was a real death camp.' The fact that anti-semitism was escalating also contributed to his desire to escape.

He plotted his exit for ten years, thinking of little else. 'It was a very hard decision to make; not for the faint-hearted or squeamish,' says this alert and daring man roaring with laughter. 'We are sitting drinking special buffalo grass vodka and eating *pelmeni*, a sort of Russian ravioli, and *kuriny schnitzel*.

'This would have been considered a great feast in Russia, except the portions would have been larger,' he says with nostalgia more, one suspects, for the portions than Russia.

He planned his career carefully in order to get on a tourist trip. 'The only thing I did not do was join the Party. I did not have the hypocrisy in me.'



He worked his way up and became editor of a mass-circulation popular science magazine, *Knowledge is Power*. And at last his chance to escape arrived in the form of a writers' trip to Britain. 'I had the actual hour I would defect marked,' he says, in an accent that is a hybrid of mid-European and Harrovian.

His defection was finely calculated and turned out to be comically civilised. One day, when the writers were allowed on a shopping trip either in groups or alone, Finkelstein stood coolly on the pavement and counted them out. Then he simply hailed a taxi. He went next to Charing Cross

station and deposited his case. Then he wandered off to Lyons Corner House for a glass of Coke. 'I didn't want to arrive at the Home Office panting,' he says laconically. When he reached Whitehall, which was, unfortunately, the wrong venue, he shot his phrase: 'I am Soviet journalist seeking political asylum.' His knowledge of English was sketchy and nostalgic, his other useful phrase being 'milk must be poured first when you make tea'. The officials looked terribly unimpressed. 'I underestimated the *sang froid* of the English. Russians are hugely inquisitive and emotional and after all, it can't be every day that a defector turns up.' But the Whitehall officials just pointed him to a 77 bus for Holborn, with directions to the Home Office. They didn't even phone anyone.

Finkelstein stood politely in queue at the Home Office, and then had a perfunctory interview with a 'Mr Grey' through an interpreter. A few enquiries were made, and then Mr Grey returned and said that the then Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, had granted him political asylum on the spot. He was put into a 'safe house' and whenever he went out armed himself with emergency telephone numbers – 'As I do to this day – just in case.' The safe house was in Chelsea Cloisters, then a favoured working ground for high-class prostitutes. 'Every day I saw attractive girls in the lift. The choice of venue was a good decision by MI5 – nobody would be looking there.'

After life in Russia, he felt ecstatic in England.

'I had a preconception of England being the most civilised place in the world – and I wasn't wrong.' He saw people, 'decent folk', who acted unlike anyone he had ever seen before. 'They behaved like free agents, without looking over their shoulders or weighing their words. They treated me in a totally human way.'

Certainly, they seemed a rum lot. Firstly he got a letter saying that he could work or open his own business. 'Open your own business! What an hilarious idea for a Russian.' And then he noticed people walking barefoot in the streets. 'That would be considered indecent in Russia,' he giggles. And he was astounded at the number of people stretching out and taking a nap on a sunny day in the park. 'It is prohibited to go on the grass in Russia. I thought they were homeless.'

Visiting Russian friends, who fraternise with him secretly, are equally astonished. He has a house full of élitist gadgets like a stereo and fridge and makes non-cash transactions. 'Cheque books are unknown in Russia.' They also see that he has a 'magic card' that he inserts in the wall, and money comes out. 'What could prove my financial might better than that?' They think he is a VIP, because he has headed notepaper. 'Printing is state-run in the Soviet Union. Only someone very important will have printed notepaper.'

Finkelstein took a while to settle in. Eventually he became a feature writer for the BBC, where he has been ever since.

The only blight for Finkelstein, happily remarried and in a good job, is the plight of his son by his first marriage. Jewish emigration has helped most of his family to leave Russia. 'But my son Anatoli has been trying to get out for over 20 years. He is the longest refusenik of all.' Their letters never reach each other, so they can only communicate on the phone. 'He is of no use to the Russians,' he says, sighing. 'It is just their act of bloody revenge to keep him there.' And such family ties are the inevitable reason why defectors are such a rarity.

