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Man of mystery

Tovah Lazaroff , THE JERUSALEM POST

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The day after his father's funeral in 2004, British Jewish filmmaker Stuart Urban had the first strong proof that his 87-year-old father could have been a Soviet spy during World War II.

Over the years Stuart had noted a number of clues that showed his father, Garri, had a secret past.

"There were curious things" that didn't add up, he told *The Jerusalem Post* by phone from England. He had always known that his tall, handsome father, who had been both a doctor and a businessman, spoke 10 languages and who had twice escaped from a Soviet prison during World War II, was an extraordinary individual. He had never had tangible evidence that allowed him to successfully confront his father on holes in his story and his few efforts to do so were dismissed.

Something Stuart did know for certain was there was a KGB file on his father, since the two of them had gone to Ukraine and Tashkent to retrieve it in 1992 after the fall of the iron curtain. Garri, then 75, had so feared arrest during this journey that at one point in Tashkent he hired an attorney and carried an overnight bag with a toothbrush and family photos into his meeting with security officials.

Garri had said he wanted the file to verify the stories he had told of his activities during World War II. Upon their return to England with the file, however, his father did not reveal its contents, a point that Stuart noted but didn't dwell on.

So it was a conversation Stuart had with his uncle Menachem, as the pair walked around a lake following his father's funeral near his suburban London home that pushed the nagging questions in the back of Stuart's mind to the surface.

Stuart quizzed Menachem, who now lives in Savyon, for extra details.

"There is a lot more you do not know," Menachem told Stuart mysteriously. He then stated that Garri had gone on a number of missions for the Allied forces against the Nazis.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, that is an interesting point,' which my father never said." The 49-year old filmmaker recalled that at the time he had wondered, "Why did he not say it?"

To confirm his uncle's report, Stuart went to his father's home to retrieve the KGB file.

He opened his father's dresser drawer and was startled to discover that the file was gone.

"I think that he disposed of it knowing that I would come looking for it after he died," Stuart said.

His mother, who was also surprised by its disappearance, had been shown only some limited documents from the file and so the full contents of it remain a mystery, said Stuart.

SINCE STUART first learned the basic details of his father's story at age 13, new facts have continued to reveal themselves that have both deepened his understanding of his father and at the same time opened mysterious questions for which he has yet to receive satisfactory answers.

His initial exploration into his father's tale can be seen in a documentary he produced this year, *Tovarisch, I am not dead*. It is named for the autobiographical book his father wrote in 1980 about his experiences during the war. (The

film, which won Best Film at the Biografilm Festival in Italy this year, can be viewed on Wednesday, December 5, at the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival and at a special showing at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque on December 9.)

Unlike his father's book, Stuart's film goes well beyond Garri's Gulag years. It includes information on the loss of Garri's family in the war as well as the joyful reunion Garri held with his one remaining brother, Menachem, in 1964.

"It is about survivors. Who do they leave behind? Who do they love? How do they find them again? And what is the price of survival?" said Stuart.

An initial version of the documentary film, done in the 1990s, had focused on this part of the story. But Stuart shelved it in 1998 after his father viewed it and asked that it not be shown. "I threw up my arms in horror and stopped," recalled Stuart.

But after 2004, he began to work on it again and this time probed questions that he had not been able to explore when his father was alive.

The main body of the film deals with three trips he made to the former Soviet Union with his father, two in 1992 and one in 1995. It is followed with interviews Stuart did after his father's death in 2004.

The question of whether his father had been a spy during the war confronted Stuart and his father immediately upon their arrival in Ukraine. There they discovered that until the end of the communist regime, security services had kept his father's file active because they believed he was an international spy.

But it was also a charge that at the time seemed to have no substance behind it, given the nature of the communist regime, Stuart said.

When they finally received the file from an official in Garri's home city of Stanislawow, which is now in Ukraine, half of it was withheld for security reasons.

Then the official, who spoke in Russian to his father, made a puzzling statement, Stuart said.

Nervous he had misunderstood the conversation, Stuart asked his father to verify an odd remark by the official.

"If your son knew what was in the file, his hair would stand on end," the official said.

As it was, the official said he had been unable to sleep all night after reading the file.

"I asked him [his father] straight away what are those hair-raising bits and he just didn't want to talk about it," recalled Stuart, during our conversation in a Warsaw coffee shop, next door to the theater where the film was screened as part of that city's fifth annual Jewish Film Festival in November.

Looking back on his father's story now in 2007, with an eye toward the possibility that he had been a Soviet agent, said Stuart, answers some of the inconsistencies in his father's story, even as it opens up other mysteries.

His mother is certain that he was not an agent, said Stuart.

In the film, he presents the evidence of what he knows, "then you as the viewer can form your own opinion."

HIS FATHER was first arrested in 1939 when he tried unsuccessfully to leave the Soviet portion of occupied Poland by trying to escape across a river.

Garri broke out of prison within a year of that arrest with the help of an officer's wife who was in love with him. She provided him with a military uniform that allowed him to simply walk out of the work camp.

The move freed him but did not get him out of the Soviet Union, where he found employment as a doctor first in Moscow and then in Tashkent.

At the end of January 1943 he went to buy a cigarette and was arrested by the Soviet secret service, who knew of his 1940 escape and who had followed him since then.

The 1939 arrest, Stuart said, was verified by an official document and a small portion of the KGB file that Garri showed his wife, Josephine, upon his return to England.

At the time she recorded in her diary that he had been arrested in 1939 for attempting to leave the Soviet Union and was sentenced to five years. Also according to Josephine's records, the file notes that Garri had a Polish passport as well as one that been issued by the French consul in Egypt.

Stuart speculates that before the war his father had been involved in some form of smuggling as had many young men "on the make" and as such had more than one passport and was adept at crossing borders.

He had changed the details regarding his place of birth and told the Soviets he was from Warsaw, instead of what was then the Polish border city of Stanislawow. He includes that fact in his book and only years later speaks publicly about his real birthplace.

A document retrieved from the 1992 trip, as shown in the film, stated that Garri was arrested a second time in 1943. At that time he was charged with counterrevolutionary activity.

The absence of any charge relating to his first prison break has prompted Stuart to wonder if his father been allowed to escape. It is possible, he pondered, that his father made a deal with the Soviets in 1940 based on his willingness to go on a foreign mission for them, given that he spoke perfect German. At the time, Urban said, it was not unusual for the Soviets to send Jews like his father into Germany.

Or maybe given the scarcity of doctors, they believed he was more valuable to them working outside the camp than in, speculated Stuart, and then rearrested him in 1943.

DURING THAT 1943 arrest, Garri said in the film, the Soviets tortured him by placing him into a straitjacket and strapping him onto a block of ice.

Back in his cell he decided there was no choice left for him but death. There was nothing, however, in the small bare room that could be used to commit suicide. The only option, he recalled for the camera years later as he sat in his home in England, "was to open my veins with my teeth."

He held his wrist to his mouth, to show how he had done this. "I bit with all my teeth and I kept biting until blood came out," he said.

But far from killing him, his success in opening a vein rekindled his will to live. "I said I will not die like that, I will not die."

With no way to stop the blood flow, he held his arm up in the air. A guard, who saw the blood seeping under the cell door, crashed it open, knocked him unconscious and then sent him to the infirmary.

As he recovered, he managed to find street clothing. In his book Garri describes how one night when the guard outside his room had fallen asleep, he crept out, jumped out the hospital window and scaled the wall that surrounded the building.

For the second time he escaped prison, but not the Soviet Union.

He continued to work as a doctor until the end of the war, presumably under a similar type of arrangement, according to Stuart.

He has documentation confirming that his father was a doctor during the war and a medical inspector in 1944, which means that he can document both that he was in prison in 1943 and that he was no longer being held a year later.

Garri finally left the Soviet Union after the war and made it to an American zone, by moving through Poland and

Eastern Europe under the guise that he was a German soldier returning home from the Russian front.

Stuart is the first to admit that there are holes in his father's narrative, to which he is still seeking answers.

"One can only ask questions in an informed way. We do not have the answers. One can merely speculate that essentially he was clever, he was able to adapt and survive," said Stuart.

His own efforts to obtain a copy of his father's file from the former Soviet Union have been unsuccessful.

The official who first gave it to his father in 1992, told him that all copies have disappeared. In a more formal query, the authorities denied that such a file ever existed.

After the war, Garri worked as a doctor with Jewish refugees until he was able to get papers out of Europe and into Venezuela.

Then in the mid-1950s, in a jewelry shop, he met and fell in love with a British geology student, Josephine. After their marriage they moved to England. He gave up medicine, went into business, and together with Josephine raised two boys in a home with a lawn in a suburb of London.

STUART CREDITS his own interest in film to his father who owned a "windup 16 mm. camera" with which he made films "with my brother and me."

So it seemed almost natural for Stuart to pick up the camera himself in 1972 when he was 13, just about the time he first learned enough of his father's story to understand what happened to him during the war.

"That is why the first film I made was about Nazis. It was kids playing a war story, because we found what happened in the Holocaust and it was very interesting thing for us," said Stuart.

The brief 27-minute film, done with a cast of young teens his age, called *The Virus of War*, was an adventure story about British secret service agents who go to an island in the South Pacific to stop a fascist Nazi-like regime from taking over the world.

The sight of teens pretending to be soldiers drew a lot of public attention to the film.

Stuart was invited to show his work at the Cannes film festival in 1973 when he was 14, and was the youngest filmmaker to have done so.

Since then, he has worked on TV dramas, documentaries and feature films. He is a two-time winner of the British Academy Award. Among his other credits are the 1993 television drama *An Ungentlemanly Act* about the Falklands War, the 1996 mini-series *Our Friends in the North* and the television movie *Deadly Voyage*. He has also directed the films *Preaching to the Perverted* in 2001 and *Revelation* in 2002.

Sometimes people hear about *Tovarisch* and "they say, 'Not another Holocaust film.' Then they are amazed, it is not a catalog of massacres and suffering. It is as much about triumph and the strength of personality."

The film is "a testament, but not an unquestioning testament to what my father endured and survived."



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