

TOP SECRET

# THE SPY

## Who Fooled His Mother

Swindlers and thieves often use false identities when committing crimes, but the story of spy Erwin van Haarlem (his real name was Václav Jelínek) is unique. Not only did he fool the entire world, but he even tricked his own “mother.” Mrs. Van Haarlem of Holland spent 33 years searching for the son she abandoned in Prague. She finally tracked him down in London. However, the man she discovered was not her son—he was a clever Soviet spy.

It was a cool Saturday morning in April 1988, when a van full of detectives stopped near the home of Erwin van Haarlem. Van Haarlem was an art dealer in northern London, who lived alone in an apartment in the quiet Friern Barnet neighborhood. In recent months, his apartment became the focus of a major counterintelligence investigation by Britain's MI5. Van Haarlem was suspected of not being an art dealer, but a foreign agent.

Inside his apartment, the Dutchman was sitting in his kitchen, still in his pajamas. He wore an earpiece which was connected to the radio he was hunched over. He was tuned in to a mysterious radio station—one of many such that operated during the Cold War period. It carried the voice of a woman reciting long series of numbers in Czech, as well as the beeps and dashes characteristic

of Morse code. These were presumed to be encoded instructions for the spy.

At 9:15, van Haarlem was interrupted by a thud as the anti-terrorism unit of London's Metropolitan Police flung open the door of his apartment. He jumped up and tried to collapse the antenna so he could hide his radio, but it jammed. Instead, he dashed over to a drawer and grabbed a kitchen knife. Before he could do anything, one of the detectives overpowered van Haarlem. "Enough!" the man shouted. "It's over! We've caught you!"

The police detectives searched the apartment carefully. It didn't take long to begin finding what they were looking for. Hidden among the many pieces of artwork laid out around the apartment were tiny codebooks stuck inside bars of soap, strange chemicals and car magazines that were later discovered to contain secret messages written in invisible ink. Some at MI5 believed that van Haarlem was not even a Dutchman and that he was living under a false identity.

"You are under arrest on suspicion of spying for the Soviet Union!" a detective announced as he slapped handcuffs onto the prisoner's wrists.

"It's a mistake!" van Haarlem protested. "I have nothing to do with the Soviet Union. I'm a citizen of the Netherlands. You've arrested an innocent man."

"You can stop the game already," the detective roared, "and make it easier for yourself by telling us your true name."

"Erwin van Haarlem is my real name, and you'll greatly regret your wrongful arrest."

The detectives just shrugged. They led the stranger away to a prison cell and locked him inside. The investigators were convinced that van Haarlem was not his real name, though they had no idea what his true name was. That's why they were shocked when a Dutch woman in her 60s arrived at the prison and identified herself as Johanna van Haarlem, the prisoner's mother. She insisted that her son was no spy. He was an upstanding Dutch citizen she had left in a Prague orphanage when he was a baby, only reuniting with him 11 years earlier.



Modrany, a small village outside of Prague where Václav Jelínek was raised.



Russian embassy in Prague.



Headquarters of StB, Czechoslovakia's secret police agency.

## A Meeting with the StB

The young Czech soldier in the guard booth outside of Prague's Soviet embassy was very bored. He could barely wait for his shift to end. Meanwhile, he passed the time by studying a list of German vocabulary words from a small card. He was startled by an angry voice demanding, "What are you doing?!"

Václav Jelínek jumped up. His supervisor had just caught him red-handed. "I was bored," Jelínek explained truthfully, "so I am using my time to improve my language skills."

"Come with me," his supervisor's eyes blazed. He led Jelínek to an office where two well-dressed men were sitting. "Sit down!" one of the men ordered.

Jelínek was certain he was about to be disciplined, but the two men didn't offer a single word of rebuke. They introduced themselves as members of the *Statni Bezpecnost* (StB, the secret police agency of communist Czechoslovakia). Like Russia's KGB, this agency had agents all over the country and everyone was terrified of it. It was used to keep the country's citizens in line, and anyone who voiced a word of objection against the government was dealt with harshly. But the StB also maintained a

foreign presence, with a network of 2,000 agents in 72 countries around the world.

This was at the height of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and the West stood moments away from a disastrous hot war. Each side found it critical to understand the other's intentions at all times, and to learn this they did their best to infiltrate the enemy's offices with spies. In 1967, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia were all communist and part of the Soviet bloc, and they shared common interests. The StB was on the lookout for good spy recruits to send abroad to gather information.

## Born to Spy

From a young age, Václav Jelínek proved to be both very clever and very independent-minded. He was born in August 1944, in the village of Modrany, not far from Prague. Although his father owned a bakery, they were always poor. Young Václav put his head to work to satisfy his hunger. For example, when the nearby Vltava River flooded, he swam to the fields on the other side and stole the fruit. Then he swam back and shared the proceeds with the other hungry children.

When the time came for Jelínek to report for military service, he stood out among the