
Beyond the red shoe: Searching for Mrs Petrov

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A fictionalised account of the Petrov Affair begins with its most famous incident. This occurred on the tarmac of Sydney's Mascot airport on 19 April 1954:

Evdokia knew this crowd was here for her. They were hunting her. They were here to prevent her escaping through the terminal, onto the plane ... Her escorts had revolvers in their jackets. If it was Moscow's instruction, they'd do away with her here ... She could not believe it, the number of people, the lights, the shadows ... Evdokia wanted to stop. She wanted to stop and turn and run. Zharkov at her elbow, insisting otherwise ... The crowd thought the men were dragging her, pushing her, physically compelling her to move. They swept towards them, shouting, appealing.¹

This retelling barely approximates what happened on that dramatic evening. Certainly, the iconic photograph (see Figure 1) capturing a vulnerable and anguished woman, missing one shoe, being escorted by burly Soviet couriers towards the Moscow-bound plane, has entered our historical memory. But, as to be expected, there is a disjuncture between historical imagination and the archival record.² The drama of this event overshadows the complexity of negotiations and tactics used when the plane reached Darwin. The truth of what happened then, behind the scenes, is still opaque. A similar issue lies at the heart of our search for the truth about Evdokia Petrov. We began with the intention of a conventional biographical portrait—one that extended, but was still consistent with, previous studies. Instead, what we discovered was that, in investigating the dialogue between truth and illusion, we entered a world of deception and dissembling from which we emerged more uncertain than ever. This article, then, is an exercise in biography as frustration. In part it is an exploration of what is known about Evdokia. In tracing her history through her own words, through Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), government and newspaper reports, through oral history and through secondary studies, we highlight the ways in which elements of her story unravel. We argue that there can be no certainty in its retelling. Evdokia Petrov's words and her portrayal by contemporaries demonstrate that any attempt at biography is plagued by ambiguity.

1 Andrew Croome, *Document Z* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009), 2–3, 275.

2 For Evdokia's own account of that evening, see 'Statement of Evokia Alexseevna Petrov', 22 May 1954, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A6283, 14, folios 117–18.



Figure 1: Evdokia Petrov at Mascot Airport, Sydney, being escorted across the tarmac to a waiting plane by two armed Russian diplomatic couriers.

Source: Royal Commission on Espionage — Exhibit 62, National Archives of Australia: A6201, 62.

Much of the literature dealing with the Petrovs focuses on the period up to and including the 1954–55 Royal Commission on Espionage (RCE). Michael Bialoguski's account ends in early 1955 and the Petrovs' own book was completed in mid-1955.³ It concluded with Evdokia's (hereafter Petrova's) hope that 'a new morning [was] beginning' in their lives.⁴ The Petrovs' post-defection time is briefly discussed by David McKnight but few insights into their life are provided.⁵ Wilhelm Agrell writes that 'on an emotional level [the defection] had cost her her life', but does not elaborate.⁶ We do have her own words: through the RCE transcripts, on tape, in published memoir and across magazine articles.⁷ But there are no biographies and, notwithstanding the most recent study of the Petrovs' defection, Agrell's *Mrs Petrova's Shoe*, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge of the post-defection life of Petrova. The most authoritative account of their defection, by Robert Manne, notes in the concluding chapter that, by the time *Empire of Fear* had been published, the Petrovs 'had become bundles of nerves, fears and resentments'.⁸ In this article we re-examine slices of Petrova's life and look at how she was portrayed by the media; in her own autobiographical portrait; by ASIO; and in the recollections of her closest friend in Australia, Regina Meinhold. Each, in their own way, raises questions about the veracity of our received understanding of this remarkable woman.

It is unsurprising that the many ways Petrova has been typecast mirror the broader social context of the period. Early perceptions of her were shaped by the gendered frame in which her defection was cast.⁹ Gendered constructions, constantly invoked and indelibly imprinted, by both media and contemporary commentators, interpret her through the prism of her appearance and her relationship with her husband. Her portrayal in this manner is not unique. The imposition of gender stereotypes on alleged or actual women spies and communists has been noted by Olmstead.¹⁰ Journalists' descriptions in 1948–49 of, for example, Elizabeth Bentley as a 'svelte

3 Michael Bialoguski, *The Petrov Story* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1955). Before the Petrovs' *Empire of Fear* was published in 1956 (deliberately delayed, unlike Bialoguski's, until the report of the RCE was released first), it was serialised exclusively by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in September and October 1955.

4 Vladimir Petrov and Evdokia Petrov, *Empire of Fear* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1956), 342.

5 David McKnight, *Australia's Spies and their Secrets* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 90–1. There is no mention in Nicholas Whitlam and John Stubbs, *Nest of Traitors: The Petrov Affair* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1974) but, from a perspective different from this article, this period is discussed in Phillip Deery, *Spies and Sparrows: ASIO and the Cold War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2022), ch. 5, doi.org/10.23071/jj.1176766.

6 Wilhelm Agrell, *Mrs Petrova's Shoe: The True Story of a KGB Defection* (London: IB Tauris, 2019), 189, doi.org/10.5040/9781838600914.

7 Evdokia Alexeyevna Petrov, interview by Robert Manne, 21 and 28 June, and 5 and 12 July 1996, sound recording, National Library of Australia Oral History Section ORAL TRC 3500; 'Death, My Only Way to Happiness', *Woman's Day*, 6 August 1956, 12–13, 31; 'Afraid to Sleep ... to Dream', *Woman's Day*, 13 August 1956, 8–9; 'I'll Be a Good Australian', *Woman's Day*, 20 August 1956, 8–9; Kay Windsor, 'Woman on the Run', *People*, 16 September 1956, in The National Archives, UK (TNA): KV2/3454, PF137694/V16, folio 677.

8 Robert Manne, *The Petrov Affair: Politics and Espionage* (Sydney: Pergamon, 1987), 257–8.

9 Vera Mackie, 'Evdokia Petrov's Shoe', *Lilith* 14 (2005), 24. There was also a dimension of race and whiteness: 'The blonde, attractive and vulnerable Evdokia Petrov is someone "we" can identify with: she can be assimilated into the white Australian imaginary' (23).

10 Kathryn S. Olmstead, 'Blond Queens, Red Spiders, and Neurotic Old Maids: Gender and Espionage in the Early Cold War', *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 1 (2004), 78–94, doi.org/10.1080/0268452042000222939.

young blonde' in a 'form-fitting black dress', or Judith Coplan's 'full lips and ... shapely figure', were echoed in Australia in 1954–55. Olmstead's four case studies—Bentley, Coplan, Priscilla Hiss and Ethel Rosenberg—were variously stereotyped as threatening symbols: 'deadly spiders, neurotic old maids and hysterical Stalinists'.¹¹

While Petrova was subject to sexualised caricature, she was neither feared nor reviled. Instead, journalists were captivated and sympathetic.¹² During the proceedings of the RCE, she was painted by the press not as a threat, but as a celebrity. Her portrayal marginalised her substance and provided her with a useful shield. The day before her initial RCE appearance in Melbourne, the first of twenty-one days in the witness box, the secretary to the commission, Kenneth Herde, predicted that the 'glamorous' Mrs Petrov would 'look her best'; after all, he commented, 'what woman doesn't like to look nice?'¹³ When she arrived at the High Court building in Melbourne on 6 July, her clothing was emphasised: a royal blue suit with a white blouse and a small, close-fitting white felt hat. She was a 'diminutive figure in blue' who 'apart from bright lipstick wore little make-up'.¹⁴ The Brisbane *Courier-Mail* staff reporter also described her attire but went further: 'Her hair was middle-length waved, and blonde. Her eyes, blueish-purple. Her complexion was clear ... her weight about 8½ stone ... her hands are tiny and very white.'¹⁵ Her figure, skin complexion and hair style were also the subject of a *Canberra Times* piece.¹⁶ None of the other, mainly male, witnesses received such attention to their appearance. The front page of the Melbourne *Argus* exhorted its readers to 'MEET EVDOKIA: WOMAN OF THE YEAR'. Such reports, which became commonplace, ignored the content of her testimony. Indeed, when she did appear on the witness stand, only her appearance was emphasised:

Constantly she used her well-shaped and manicured hands to assist in telling her story ... With her French-style pouting smile and shrug, the quick droop of the eyelids and the laugh that crinkles the corners of her grey-green eyes, she had the packed courtroom smiling.¹⁷

As a double agent working for both ASIO and the communist-affiliated NSW Peace Council, Dr Michael Bialoguski was accustomed to deception, but he was not being deceitful when he told Petrova: 'Everyone is talking about you ... You're as popular as a film star.'¹⁸ The *Woman's Day*, in fact, described her as 'the leading lady'

11 Olmstead, 'Blond Queens', 83, 91.

12 This, of course, did not apply to communist journalists. See, for example, W. J. Brown, 'The Humbug of "Poor Mrs. Petrov"', *Tribune*, 8 August 1956, 6.

13 Newspaper clipping [source obscured], 'Mrs Petrov "Looks Best" for Spy Drama', NAA: A6119, 11, folio 40.

14 'Mrs. Petrov in Box. A Tiny Figure in Blue', *Herald* (Melbourne), 6 July 1954, 1; 'Mrs. Petrov Tells Her Part', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 7 July 1954, 1.

15 'Evdokia, Proud-Faced Captivating Witness', *Courier-Mail*, 7 July 1954, 1.

16 'Hairdresser's Impressions of Mrs. Petrov', *Canberra Times*, 22 April 1954, 2.

17 'Meet Evdokia: Woman of the Year', *Argus*, 7 July 1954, 1.

18 Bialoguski, *The Petrov Story*, 231. Similarly, Petrova wrote, 'I found myself publicized like a film star'. Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 337.

and likened her to Ingrid Bergman.¹⁹ Arriving at the court the next day, 7 July, she 'stepped jauntily' from the security car 'in her field-green costume and chic black hat'; on departing, she was 'mobbed' by a large crowd of spectators.²⁰

Soon after, the press represented Petrova as a personification of domesticity, suburbia and assimilation:

Mrs Petrov, like a normal Melbourne housewife, prepares all the meals for herself and her husband. She does her own shopping for household requirements and is becoming an expert at keeping house the Australian way.²¹

Similarly, an ASIO report stated that 'Mrs. PETROV shows an appreciation of the greater scope afforded in a Western country for dress, decoration, and house-furnishing' and commented on her 'Western aptitude for clothes and cosmetics'.²² Elsewhere she was described as an 'extremely vivacious and attractive blonde who dresses smartly'²³ and who was warming to Australian suburban life. None of these various constructions of Petrova, all highly gendered, was singularly correct. She was more than a 'helpless and distressed woman',²⁴ and most definitely was not 'just a simple, rather brainless soul', as an unnamed 'leading' man, closely connected with the RCE, alleged.²⁵ While it is fair to say that she did value the material comforts and appearance of Western dress, this portrayal, in many ways, allowed this side of her character to dominate the public imagination—and, arguably, enabled Petrova to construct a persona that hid more than it revealed about her life. How then have our perceptions of Petrova been shaped by her own retelling of her life? We begin by providing an outline of her upbringing drawn from her own description.

Born in 1914 in a village near Moscow, Evdokia Alekseevna Kartseva's early life, like that of countless others, was disfigured by the poverty around her, haunted by hunger and subject to the cruelties that such a context engenders.²⁶ Despite, or perhaps because of, these experiences Petrova was deeply attached to her mother.²⁷ These formative years would also deeply commit her to the Soviet system, a system that enabled those who served it to escape deprivation and find instead a measure of

19 'Mrs. Petrov's Own Story', *Woman's Day*, 6 August 1956, 12, 13. However, another response to the *Woman's Day* articles was that they 'made me feel ever so sorry for her'. Josephine Mitchell to R. G. Menzies, 30 September 1957, NAA: A6122, 1490, folio 111.

20 'The Tears Came as Evdokia Spoke of Prison', *Argus*, 8 July 1954, 1.

21 'The Petrovs Are Settling Down', *Western Mail*, 5 August 1954, 5.

22 'Defection of Vladimir Mikhailovich PETROV and Evdokia Alexeevna PETROVA', n.d., 18, NAA: A6283, 15 [henceforth 'Defection'], folio 137. Clothing was very important to Petrova. In her (and Petrov's) identification and assessment of RIS officers who served in the Soviet Cipher Directorate, for example, she frequently described, both negatively and positively and in detail, how they and their wives dressed. See 'Report Setting out the Petrovs' Information About Cipher Clerks', 27 September 1957, TNA: KV2/3473.

23 'Petrov's Wife at Embassy', *News*, 14 April 1954, 3.

24 'The Petrov Affair', *Methodist*, 1 May 1954, 3.

25 Cited in 'Andrea's Page', *Truth*, 18 July 1954, 42.

26 What follows here is drawn primarily from Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, chs 11–13; *Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1955), 22–3, 434–5.

27 See her account in *Empire of Fear*, 105–8.

privilege and material security and a sense of community. Petrova, a devoted member of the Pioneers by the age of eleven, began her communist education with a scarf, a pin, an oath, and, from then on, a salute.²⁸ She graduated into the Komsomol, another communist youth organisation, in 1930, the same year that she finished secondary schooling. After studying English at the Technical College for Foreign Languages in Moscow, her dedication to the Soviet state was rewarded with a commission into the Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) as a junior sergeant of state security in the Military Intelligence Section in 1933. Since, as she said, she ‘could not work for them without linguistic knowledge’, she also learnt Japanese and Swedish.²⁹ She was later transferred into the Spets-Otdel, or Special Cypher Department, a key office within the Soviet bureaucracy.³⁰ Petrova’s boss was Gleb Ivanovitch Boki, an ‘old Bolshevik’ soon to be executed as ‘an enemy of the people’ after his appointment as NKVD commissioner in 1937, and she too was to become very familiar with the Great Terror. Petrova worked in cryptanalysis (code-breaking) and enciphering (transposing outward telegrams into code). As she explained it: ‘I was regarded as a specialist on processing telegrams in the Japanese language and the restoration of their distorted text.’³¹ This work was clearly valued, as demonstrated by her being awarded the Order of the Red Star and by her promotion to the rank of captain in the NKVD.

Despite such high regard, Petrova only narrowly escaped the same fate as her first husband, Roman Krivosch, also an officer in the NKVD but with literary ambitions. Roman was arrested in 1937 at the height of the purges and incarcerated in Butyrskaya prison.³² It was, Petrova recalled, her tenacity and luck that allowed her to escape with only a reprimand, later rescinded.³³ It is here that we should pause. Petrova writes in detail of her ordeal in securing her escape from a similar fate. But the fact that she was not taken into custody, and was neither evicted (initially at least) from their flat nor questioned alongside her husband as was the customary practice, raises a red flag. Not yet damning, of course, but it nonetheless raises questions as to the veracity of her account.

Petrova continues her story by telling of the tragedy of the death of her only child in 1940, the same year that she met and married Vladimir—to whom she was drawn because of the kindness he had shown her child prior to her death, and the support that he offered. Within two years the Petrovs would leave the Soviet Union for

28 Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 114.

29 ‘Mrs Petrov’s Statement Concerning Her Past Intelligence History’, 15 May 1954, 1, TNA: KV2/3456.

30 Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, *The ‘Special World’: Stalin’s Power Apparatus and the Soviet System’s Secret Structures of Communication*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009), 29, 60. For a detailed discussion of the elaborate structures of the special department for coded communications and secret administration into which Petrova was indoctrinated, see pp. 17–58.

31 ‘Mrs Petrov’s Statement Concerning Her Past Intelligence History’, 3.

32 He was released in 1941 and returned to his old job (‘they needed me then’). When they serendipitously met in 1947, he was a shadow of his former self. Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 140–1.

33 That she was not expelled from the Komsomol was due, apparently, to the intervention on her behalf by the party secretary in the Spets Otdel who emphasised her unblemished record and recommended a ‘Severe Reprimand and Serious Warning’. Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 146–7.

Stockholm, Vladimir as NKVD chief *rezident* in Sweden, she ‘simply ... as his wife’, as an understated MI5 report noted.³⁴ She recalled her four years in Sweden (1943–47) as a ‘happy and halcyon interlude’.³⁵ But there was work to be done. The Soviet legation in Sweden had become ‘the main base’ for intelligence in the war against Germany.³⁶ Petrova, assigned the code name ‘Tamara’, was allocated a wide range of duties, including undertaking operational intelligence in an attempt to recruit two prospective Swedish agents.³⁷ In October 1947, the Petrovs returned to Moscow to begin work with the newly formed KI (Committee of Information), which initially incorporated the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate or military intelligence). Their focus would be in the SK, or Soviet Colony. Vladimir was in the Sixth Department, Petrova (from 1948) in the Second, where she would continue her espionage work on Scandinavia.³⁸ She was given operational control of the large Norwegian island of Spitsbergen. As a recruiting agent for the GRU she began cultivating the daughter of a Czech general,³⁹ further underlining her importance to the Russian Intelligence Services (RIS). Her political progress was completed relatively late when she was finally admitted as a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1950, the same year that the Petrovs were posted to Australia.

We know, then, through Petrova’s words and those of others, that she was by now a veteran of the Soviet security system and was highly motivated, trained, experienced and, to the extent possible in her line of work, trusted. When she arrived at the Soviet Union’s Canberra embassy in February 1951, her ostensible position was embassy accountant, photographer and secretary to the ambassador, but, as she put it, after the *rezident*, Valentin Sadovnikov, was recalled to Moscow shortly after their arrival, ‘he handed over to me all his agent and cypher archives’, along with the keys to the embassy’s secure safe.⁴⁰ Entry to the cypher section of the embassy and thus to its secret records was highly restricted. An MI5 report would later note: ‘an observant and intelligent cypher clerk will certainly acquire good knowledge of the intelligence operations currently run out of the Residency [Embassy]’. The cypher clerk would also gain ‘access to the Resident’s records and thus learn the identities of all contacts and agents cultivated or recruited’.⁴¹ In her own recollections, Petrova attempted to resolve the tension between her life as a spy and her life as a member of a brutal security state through a narrative arc familiar to many Soviet defectors:

34 ‘Personal History of Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov’, 6, TNA: KV2/3456.

35 Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 171–5; ‘Report on the Background History of Evdokia Alexeyevna Petrov’, 2 July 1954, NAA: A6283, 14, folios 135–6.

36 Agrell, *Mrs Petrova’s Shoe*, 50.

37 Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 177–87. She handled one agent, ‘Klara’, from February 1945 to October 1947. See the four-page ‘TOP SECRET’, ‘Soviet Intelligence Activities in Sweden. The Case of “Klara”’, TNA: KV2/3458, commencing folio 112bc. On Klara, who most likely was a double agent, see also C. G. McKay, ‘The Mysterious FRIEND: An Exercise in Swedish Venona’, accessed 10 August 2023, intelligencepast.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/an-exercise-in-swedish-venona.pdf.

38 ‘Miscellaneous Soviet Intelligence Personalities’ [n.d. 1955?], NAA: A6283, 16, folio 173.

39 ‘Miscellaneous Soviet Intelligence Personalities’, folios 173–4.

40 ‘Mrs Petrov’s Statement Concerning Her Past Intelligence History’, 5.

41 Report, ‘Organisation of a State Security Legal Residency’, paras 93–4, p. 18, 10 March 1955, TNA: KV2/3463.

a devastating childhood, attraction to the relative security of youth brigades, followed by a successful indoctrination into the vast bureaucracy of the ‘empire of fear’.⁴² Despite the latter realisation, and in contrast to the public portrayal in the Australian mainstream media, Petrova was determined to emphasise her own capacities as an agent of the Soviet state, albeit one with limited agency—a victim of the system.

Little of this capacity was evident, or even known, to the authorities when Petrova sought and was immediately granted asylum on that hot night in Darwin on 21 April 1954. She was initially seen as inconsequential and ASIO only gradually realised that she was a valuable asset—potentially more valuable than her husband. The defection of a cypher clerk who encrypted and decrypted the RIS’s most valued secrets, coupled with someone with direct operational experience, who had worked with agents in the field, therefore represented a major counterintelligence coup.⁴³ However, the debriefing of the Petrovs after their RCE appearances was fraught. On the one hand, it was soon realised that the exposure of Soviet agents abroad, under diplomatic cover, yielded highly significant intelligence. For example, in June 1955, the security liaison officer (SLO) reported to his MI5 superiors that Petrova had provided the following explosive information on Juho Passiviki, prime minister of Finland from 1944 to 1946 and president from 1946 to 1956:

About 1949 Elisei [Yelisei] Tikhonovich SINITSYN, the Chief of the Scandinavian Countries in the Second Directorate of the KI, told me in conversation in Moscow that he had many agents in the Finnish Government, including PASSIKIWI [*sic*] who I think was the Prime Minister of Finland or who held a high Government position. SINITSYN personally controlled this man when he, SINITSYN, was the Resident in Finland in 1945–46 ... I was working in the Swedish section under his direct control.⁴⁴

None of the biographical entries on Passiviki refers to his recruitment by the RIS, which Petrov claimed occurred just before World War II.

42 The title chosen by the Petrovs (or by the ASIO ghostwriter Michael Thwaites) for their memoir.

43 On Petrova’s handling of Gertrude Mayer, codenamed Maria, who worked in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see ‘The Case of “MARIA”’, in ‘Preliminary Report on Some Cases of Attempted Soviet Espionage in Sweden’, 5 August 1954, 3, TNA: KV 2/3458. The Swedish Intelligence Service (Säpo) also interrogated Petrova. See ‘Report on the Organisation of Soviet Cipher Services’, 10 August 1956, NAA: A6283, 5, folios 70–84; ‘Soviet Intelligence Activities in Sweden. The Case of the Danish Politician’, statement by Mrs Petrov [‘Top Secret’], TNA: KV 2/3458, following folio 1286 (this senior Danish politician, M. Larsson, provided Petrova with ‘extremely interesting and revealing’ information over the course of six consecutive nightly visits); ‘Report on Identifications by MRS PETROV from List and Photographs of Soviet Officials Serving in SWEDEN since 1948’, TNA: KV 2/3465. An accompanying memorandum, dated 22 June 1955, emphasised Petrova’s importance, stating: ‘You will have noticed that items 132 and 133 of that report have clinched the identifications of the Soviet emissaries concerned in the “SVEN” case’. ‘Report on Identifications’, folio 592a. Her ninety-third identification in 1955 was that of Aleksei Panzjenskij, ostensibly an embassy attaché but who served in the ‘illegal’ directorate of the Swedish Operational Section. ‘Report on Identifications’, 3–4. A previous report, dated 17 February 1955, identified no fewer than 293 Soviet officials serving in Sweden between 1940 and 1947. See TNA: KV2/3463.

44 Memorandum to SLO, 1 June 1955, TNA: KV 2/3465, folio 590. In another report, as we shall see, she referred to Sinitsyn as a ‘close friend’ upon whom she did not wish to ‘bring trouble’. ‘Miscellaneous Soviet Intelligence Personalities Who Have Served Abroad’, 7, TNA: KV 2/3460, n.f.

On the other hand, ASIO was in equal measure frustrated with the Petrovs and concerned for their mental health. The interrogations and the fear of reprisal for their defection had taken a toll.⁴⁵ So too had their living arrangements. Despite early perceptions that Petrova would easily adapt to life in Australia, ASIO now felt that she was both distressed and unstable.⁴⁶ As a circuit breaker, they arranged a holiday in Surfers Paradise. Three cars with five ASIO officers and the Petrovs departed from Sydney on 23 September 1955. ASIO's director-general, Charles Spry, anticipated that relocation to Melbourne would occur before 1 December, when debriefing would recommence full-time and continue until the end of 1956.⁴⁷ It did not go to plan. Within a week, Petrova became dangerously ill and was taken to St George Hospital in Sydney for emergency surgery.⁴⁸ But she was not the only concern for ASIO. Vladimir responded to Petrova's illness with a volatile mixture of apparent indifference and reckless intoxication. ASIO was in danger of losing control of their two most important assets.⁴⁹ The misfortune of the Petrovs continued after Petrova left hospital in late October, and their relationship further deteriorated under the strain of interrogation and defection.⁵⁰

In May 1956, Vladimir threatened to commit suicide. A shotgun that he was assembling for this purpose was wrested from him during 'an ugly scuffle', an ASIO officer was injured and Petrova 'made a resolute attempt to throttle her husband'.⁵¹ Though the Petrovs managed to keep this domestic disfunction private to all but ASIO and MI5 officers, their shared melancholy was made public after Petrova sat down with Kay Windsor in a lengthy interview. The public perceptions of 'the glamorous' Mrs Petrov were now superseded by a realisation that her defection had cast a long and miserable shadow over her life. Fearful for herself and her family, and dissatisfied with her life in Australia, the public narrative surrounding the Petrovs was irrevocably altered. As Windsor noted in August 1956, 'the spy drama of a year ago has become the human tragedy of today'.⁵² MI5's SLO in Australia was concerned that 'if the Soviet authorities read these articles' they might consider 'persuading her to redefect, using her relatives as hostages'.⁵³ It is not clear to us why Petrova allowed her vulnerability to be made so public at this time. Was it to engender sympathy from

45 Memorandum, 7 September 1955, 'Attitude of Mr. and Mrs. Petrov at Safe House on 7.9.1955', NAA: A6283, 73, folios 160–3.

46 Memorandum, 7 September 1955; 'Defection', folio 137.

47 Minute Paper, Spry to deputy DG (Operations), 5 September 1955, NAA: A6283, 73, folio 240.

48 Correspondence, J. M. Gilmour to deputy controller, Royal Commission Section [henceforth Gilmour to DC], 30 September 1955, 'Operation on Mrs. Petrov', NAA: A6283, 73, folio 272–3.

49 Gilmour to DC, 13 October 1955, 'Trouble at Safe House with Mr. V. M. Petrov', NAA: A6283, 73, folios 333–4; Gilmour to DC, 18 October 1955, 'Illness of Mrs. Petrov', NAA: A6283, 73, folio 341; NAA: A6283, 73 folio 351.

50 For further details, see Deery, *Spies and Sparrows*, 117–20.

51 SLO to Head Office, MI5, 2 July 1956, TNA: KV2/3453, folio 665a.

52 The following is based on the above-cited articles in *Woman's Day*, 6, 13, 20 August 1956, 3 September 1956, and 'Woman on the Run', *People*, 16 September 1956.

53 SLO to MI5, 'The Petrovs' State of Mind—August 1956', 3 September 1956, TNA: KV2/3471.

the Soviets? To protect her family who had been left behind? Or was it a genuine cry for help? Regardless of the reasons—and we return to this below—MI5's fears were genuine.

MI5 was not the only agency concerned. ASIO was also on edge. They feared that the Olympic Games would enable the Soviets to either contact or retaliate against the Petrovs. Indeed, the Petrovs later identified ten RIS personnel who travelled to Melbourne with the Soviet Olympic team.⁵⁴ Accordingly, on 2 November they were relocated to the Gold Coast for two months. They stayed in the two-storey home of two ASIO operatives, Dudley and Joan Doherty, and their three children; and here we rely on Joan's reminiscences to gain a sense of Petrova's situation. As the two became close friends, Petrova made her distaste for her husband known. The SLO noted: she 'constantly reprimands him for his boorish ways'.⁵⁵ But it went further. According to the author of *With My Little Eye*, who interviewed Joan: 'When she [Petrova] discussed him with Joan, she would say, "He's just a ..." and made a rude spitting noise.' Petrova told Joan he was 'weak and cowardly' and blamed him bitterly for defecting without telling her. More viscerally, he was 'repulsive' to her and she made 'scathing remarks about his body'. But, according to Joan, she did not fear reprisal when she publicly admonished him.⁵⁶ It was in this period 'that she suffered the indignity, and publicity, of her husband being arrested; he was drunk, bleeding, semi-naked and gave police a false name, John Olsen'.⁵⁷ ASIO alerted Dudley that newspaper journalists were onto the story and the Dohertys and the Petrovs were forced to relocate to two further safe houses, in Brisbane and Caloundra.⁵⁸ Spry told Menzies that both Petrovs were 'now psychopathic cases'.⁵⁹ With their personal relationship spiralling out of control, the domestic distress reported in ASIO files stands in stark contrast to the picture provided by the Petrovs in their concluding chapter of *Empire of Fear*, in which both mused on their escape from the Soviet Union and the fear that it engendered, and hoped that their elusive 'new morning' would begin (see Figure 2).⁶⁰

54 'XVI Olympiad Melbourne 1956: Russian Intelligence Personnel', DG to SLO, 3 December 1956, TNA: KV2/3473, folio 1080a; SLO to MI5, 17 December 1956, TNA: KV2/3474, folio 1080.

55 SLO to MI5, 5 May 1954, TNA: KV2/3442, folio 201a.

56 Sandra Hogan, *With My Little Eye* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2021), 118–23. For a fascinating interview with the Doherty's daughter, Sue-Ellen, who became very fond of Petrova but despised Petrov, see 'Best of 2021—Sue-Ellen Kusher', ABC Conversations, 14 December 2021, www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/sue-ellen-kusher-secret-agents-in-the-suburbs/13666862.

57 Deery, *Spies and Sparrows*, 120; 'Who Was the Half-Naked Drunk at Surfers?', *Tribune*, 5 December 1956, 3. This incident was also reported in the *Sun-Herald* (Sydney) and the *Daily Mirror*.

58 Hogan, *With My Little Eye*, 126–7.

59 Spry to Menzies, 29 November 1956, cited in David Horner, *Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO 1949–1963* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 459.

60 Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 342.



Figure 2: Evdokia and Vladimir Petrov, 1955.

Source: pbs.twimg.com/media/EtVaaxCUYAkOIN.jpg.

Despite the apparent distress of the Petrovs, ASIO continued its interrogations well beyond their anticipated time frame.⁶¹ ASIO's desire for more intelligence hit a roadblock when the Petrovs continued to push back against their interrogators.⁶² While a change in approach by the security agency led to the revelation of small but 'significant' intelligence,⁶³ ASIO could not prevent the inevitable and they found

61 SLO to MI5, 25 July 1957, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 693a; SLO to MI5, 28 November 1957, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 710a.

62 The new director-general of MI5, Roger Hollis, had described this unwillingness as 'mulish'. R. H. Hollis to M. Y. Watson (Ministry of Defence), 2 August 1956, TNA: KV2/3471, folio 981a.

63 SLO to MI5, 8 October 1957, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 704a.

themselves at loggerheads with their unwilling collaborators.⁶⁴ Four years after their defection, MI5 had largely given up hope of getting more information out of the Petrovs, but ASIO continued to try.⁶⁵ By now, Petrova was reporting to ASIO that Vladimir was 'impossible to live with'.⁶⁶

Impossible or not, Petrova continued to live with Vladimir until 1974 in their nondescript two-bedroom house at East Bentleigh.⁶⁷ The original lino kitchen floor is still visible in real estate photos. She found employment as a typist, upgraded to a permanent secretary because of her competence and efficiency, with William Adams Tractors in Clayton. This, we can assume, boosted her spirits, since (as noted by MI5) domestic chores did not 'fully or satisfactorily engage her considerable energies and talents'.⁶⁸ Her immediate neighbours knew but did not reveal the true identity of Maria Anna Allyson, and one even helped construct a special gate in the adjoining side fence should the need to escape arise.⁶⁹

We have seen that Petrova's post-defection experience was troubled and difficult. The external forces over which she had little control produced fear, anxiety and remorse. And it is true that she also suffered inner turmoil; however, here our biographical portrait becomes more complicated. To reconcile her public persona with the private humiliation of the defection meant, for Petrova, that she had to unburden her history. This she could not do. An ASIO report noted that she still retained 'affection and loyalty to Russia', an MI5 interrogator commented that 'she is still in many ways in sympathy with the Soviet regime' and an intelligence historian concluded that she was 'less cynical' about the Soviet Union than Vladimir.⁷⁰ She was still handcuffed to her past.

In the Petrovs' own opening words in *Empire of Fear*, as children of the revolution they were given 'opportunities which we would never have enjoyed otherwise; we each rose to positions of comfort, prosperity and privilege in the Soviet services'. They added that, in the decades since first joining the RIS, they were 'members of that select minority of Soviet citizens who are the governing bureaucracy of modern Russia',⁷¹ and that as members of that elite were consequently separated from

64 SLO to MI5, 28 November 1957, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 710a.

65 SLO to MI5, 31 January 1958, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 715a; D. H. Whyte (MI5) to [blank], 9 June 1958, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 724a. Intelligence production resumed in 1959 with an increased emphasis on Petrova's information.

66 SLO to MI5, 2 July 1958, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 729a.

67 After a series of strokes, he was admitted to the Mount Royal Geriatric Hospital in Parkville, where he remained until he died in June 1991.

68 SLO to MI5, 31 October 1956, TNA: KV2/3454, folio 683b.

69 Petrov, interview, 5 July 1996.

70 'Defection', folio 135; SLO to MI5, 5 May 1954, TNA: KV2/3442, folio 201a; Kevin P. Riehle, *Soviet Defectors: Revelations of Renegade Intelligence Officers, 1924–1954* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 222, doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474467230.001.0001. The ASIO report added that her criticisms were of 'local Soviet authorities and their behaviour', not of the 'Soviet system or of Moscow control'.

71 Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 11.

mainstream Soviet society. Petrova continued to be shadowed by her background. About her convictions, she told Robert Manne in the early 1990s: 'I was a very devoted Russian KGB person.'⁷² In the 1950s, at least, the present tense could easily have been substituted.

Indicative was her deep concern that offering information about her 'dear friend', Colonel Ivan Ivanovich Agayans, would not 'in any way bring trouble upon [him]'. Agayans had known her since childhood through the Pioneers and, at the time of Petrova's defection, was chief of the State Security Department (Second Directorate of the KI) that covered all of Europe.⁷³ The same desire to protect applied to her 'old friend', Yelisei Sinitsyn, also a senior intelligence officer with the Second Directorate in charge of the Scandinavian Department. Notwithstanding this, she elsewhere provided the intelligence services with a very detailed portrait of Sinitsyn.⁷⁴ It was Sinitsyn, now assigned an MI5 personal file number (737517), who furnished Petrova with details about the possible espionage of the Finnish prime minister/president, referred to earlier. Petrova, in short, had not cut all ties with the RIS; as she herself noted, 'the training of a lifetime does not disappear overnight'.⁷⁵

RIS tradecraft, into which Petrova had been indoctrinated since the 1930s, relied—as did all intelligence services—on the art of successful deception. Such deception and dissembling are intrinsic to the tradecraft. Cover names, cover positions and fabricated life histories are the norm. Petrova, of course, was no exception. This feature of her life was evident right from the outset when she first joined the NKVD in 1933. It was evident in the intelligence services' interrogations after her defection. Sprinkled through reports and memoranda sent by both the SLO and by the Office of the UK High Commissioner to MI5 are intimations of Petrova's disingenuousness or duplicity. For example, when she was questioned about 'Klara', the agent she ran in Sweden, she was 'evasive' and 'less than candid when she reverted to her original version'.⁷⁶ This was also evident during her interviews with Robert Manne.⁷⁷

Of course, by 1996, the year that the interviews took place, Petrova's recollections may have been imperfect. However, throughout her discussions with Manne, she was adamant that Petrov was not a heavy drinker. Her repeated denials of this were more than memory lapses. There is overwhelming evidence of Vladimir's excessive vodka-

72 Petrov, interview, 28 June 1996.

73 'Miscellaneous Soviet Intelligence Personalities Who Have Served Abroad', 7, TNA: KV 2/3460, n.f. She assessed Agayans, codenamed 'Uralov', as a highly intelligent RIS officer.

74 Report, 'Soviet Intelligence Personalities Serving in Sweden Since 1944', 17–18, TNA: KV 2/3460, n.f.

75 Petrov and Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, 331.

76 Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, Canberra, to Head Office, MI5, 30 September 1954, TNA: KV 2/3460, folio 180b.

77 Manne noted that, during these interviews, she was 'bright, vivacious, courteous and kind': Robert Manne, 'Mrs Petrov's Death Brings Bizarre Affair to End', *Age*, 27 July 2002, 14.

drinking. Some have been detailed in this article; some can be gleaned from other sources, such as the interview of Regina Meinhold (a friend of Petrova's since 1952) with Bill Haskett and Diana Tapscott in 2004.⁷⁸ Meinhold relayed that Petrova:

often complained that she hid a bottle of alcohol somewhere and [Vladimir] would chase her around the table to catch her ... He was a really heavy drinker then, very heavy drinker.⁷⁹

And yet, in response to a question from Manne about whether Petrov's drinking had increased just prior to his defection, Petrova categorically stated: 'I have never ever seen him drinking. Not at home or any parties, never. Maybe when he was with Bialoguski. Never.'⁸⁰ Elsewhere, she said of her husband, whose drinking sometimes made her the target of his physical aggression, 'he was always good behaved'.⁸¹ Notwithstanding a brief acknowledgement of the 'many arguments' during the RCE, Petrova's reinvention of Vladimir represents a stark discrepancy between her recollections and those of Joan Doherty and the ASIO safe house handlers' reports. Her testimony to Manne suggests her desire to construct and control a narrative that was at variance with reality.⁸² This mythologising complicates the received understanding of Petrova.

She also spun an utterly fanciful tale of her own defection to Regina Meinhold. We need to recall the intimacy of their friendship: it was Meinhold with whom Petrova requested to stay in the safe house immediately after the defection; whose daughter's wedding in Canberra Petrova attended; and with whom Petrova maintained regular contact ('we kept in touch all the time') until she died—after all, 'we were very, very close, constantly visiting each other'.⁸³ Yet she told Meinhold that she had defected in 1954 by escaping from her Russian guards through a toilet window. 'I don't know what kind of window was there. She said she'd escaped with the help of [a policewoman] through the window', Meinhold said. 'She went with that police lady to the police station and she gave herself up. She gave herself up.'⁸⁴ None of this was true. Petrova also led Meinhold to believe that she was of singular importance to

78 Regina Meinhold, interview by Bill Haskett and Diana Tapscott, 9 September 2004, Museum of Australian Democracy. Meinhold, née Pinkans, was born in Rezekne, Latvia, in 1920. She died in 2018.

79 When the Petrovs were living in East Bentleigh, a local policeman found Vladimir, who 'liked a lot of vodka', 'lying drunk on the footpath' while another local recalled him being 'a drunken sod'. 'The Secret Life of Us: A Nice but Feisty Lady of the Suburbs', *Age*, 27 July 2002. SLO reports also regularly refer to Petrov's heavy drinking, see, for example, SLO to Head Office, MI5, 10 September 1957, TNA: KV2/3473, folio 1138a.

80 Petrov, interview, 28 June 1996.

81 Petrov, interview, 28 June 1996. It is unclear whether Petrova knew the extent of his liaisons with young prostitutes when he visited King's Cross with Bialoguski. Manne euphemistically refers to 'Petrov's Sydney girl friends', Manne, *The Petrov Affair*, 35. Petrov's intention to have a 'night out' with 'girls of not good repute' was reported in 1952 and two were identified by name in 1953 by an ASIO field officer. See reports, 15 May 1952, NAA: A6119, 11, folio 6 and 27 May 1953, NAA: A6119, 8, folio 187.

82 Petrov, interview, 5 July 1996.

83 Meinhold, interview.

84 Meinhold, interview.

her, both personally ('because of you I didn't want to go back to Russia') and in terms of keeping Petrova safe from possible assassination. This ability to dissemble strongly suggests her intelligence training stayed with her all her life.

Petrova and Meinhold's friendship raises further questions. As Petrov told the RCE (and confirmed by Sheila Fitzpatrick), one of his roles was the recruitment of agents from the 'White' Russian community.⁸⁵ Surveillance and penetration of the anti-communist Baltic and Russian émigré communities in Australia constituted an important intelligence activity.⁸⁶ Both Petrovs were already experienced in such clandestine activity. Their postings to Stockholm in 1943 and Moscow in 1947 involved both SK (monitoring of overseas Soviet citizens) and EM (operations among émigré communities) work. And, as we have seen, Petrova recruited informers and ran agents in Sweden. In Canberra, in addition to her 'cover' duties as secretary and accountant at the Russian embassy, Petrova was also tasked with operational duties that included penetrating anti-Russian émigré individuals and organisations.⁸⁷ It therefore seems highly plausible that, consistent with this brief, she targeted Meinhold as an anti-communist émigré in order to cultivate her as a source. It was, after all, Petrova who introduced herself to Meinhold in a textiles shop in Canberra in 1952. Despite having a pronounced interest in fashion, Petrova asked Meinhold if she could sew. To which Meinhold replied, 'I will try'.⁸⁸ And with this their unlikely friendship began, with Petrova arranging for an inexperienced seamstress to make her some clothes. It is apparent to us that this was most likely a cover. To all their meetings in these early years, Petrov drove his wife and then collected her; it was a joint operation.

Meinhold fits the brief as a target of EM work. She was fiercely anti-communist—her father had been murdered by the Russians, and two brothers had been sent to the Gulag. A multi-lingual Latvian, she worked voluntarily as a translator in Nazi Germany during the war. She arrived in Australia in November 1947 with the first boatload of 'displaced persons' from the Baltic states, many of whom were suspected of collaboration with the Nazis.⁸⁹

85 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril: A Cold War History of Migration to Australia* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2021), 241, doi.org/10.4324/9781003179474.

86 See *Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage*, para. 833, 241.

87 She was described by ASIO as 'an operational worker, i.e. agent-running officer'. 'Report on the Background History of Evdokia Alexeyevna Petrov', 2 July 1954, NAA: A6283, 14, folio 134.

88 Meinhold, interview.

89 Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril*, 69–71. In contrast, Regina wrote under 'Reason for coming to Germany' that she was 'Forcibly evacuated by the Germans': Regina Pinkans Migration Selection Report, 22 October 1947, NAA: A11772, Item ID 5005972.

In the year before the defection, and as tensions began to escalate in the Soviet Embassy,⁹⁰ Petrova began warning Meinhold that she would receive a visit from the embassy, and that she was not to tell the embassy official her surname. That visit did happen, and Meinhold was urged to return to Latvia. When she told Petrova of the visit, the latter reportedly stated that 'I was afraid that you'd give my name to him'. She described Petrova as 'very nervous' and 'grateful that I didn't reveal her'.⁹¹ Here, perhaps, Petrova was again dissembling. She had already introduced 'three or four' other women from the embassy to Meinhold.⁹² Rather than protecting her role as an MGB agent within the embassy (remembering that the espionage and diplomatic functions of the embassy were distinct, and RIS officers were disliked by embassy staff), it is likely that Petrova was instead drawing Meinhold closer to her.

In any event, the unlikely friendship between an anti-Soviet and a dedicated communist raises several questions. Why would Petrova fear Meinhold mentioning her name when their relationship was well known by women in the embassy? Why would Petrova, a woman whose love of Western fashion was widely documented, have clothes made for her by an inexperienced seamstress: clothes for which she was measured, but never wore? As their friendship deepened over the years there are other incongruities, including that Petrova had never confided to Meinhold that she had had a child and that she had constructed such a concocted story of her defection.

While it is evident that the relationship between Petrova and Meinhold became an important source of comfort for both women as they aged, the likelihood that Petrova and Petrov had deliberately targeted Meinhold as an unwitting informant certainly changes our understanding of the Petrovs' activities in Australia. Added to this was Petrov's consistent denial before the RCE that any pro-Soviet Russians were agents of, or even informants for, Soviet intelligence, which Fitzpatrick found 'so odd that one might suspect Petrov of protecting his friends'.⁹³ We can speculate, therefore, that, in different ways, neither of the Petrovs was ingenuous nor fully forthcoming.

Petrova's adjustment to Australian life was plagued by fears, both for her family and of her own assassination, and was punctuated by hospitalisation and domestic violence. At one point she lost the will to live. But we have also seen that, as a trained Soviet officer expert in cryptanalysis, she was valued by Western intelligence services, which initially typecast her as merely the wife of a more important defector. During three years of debriefings, she placed limits on her readiness to share her Cold War secrets

90 The jockeying for power in the aftermath of Stalin's death saw renewed restructure and purges in the security services. The head of the new organisation, Lavrentiy Beria, was soon arrested and later executed. Those deemed supportive of Beria were targeted as enemies of the people. Allegations were made in the Soviet Embassy that Petrova and Vladimir were part of a Beria cell.

91 Meinhold, interview.

92 Meinhold, interview.

93 Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril*, 257.

with her interrogators.⁹⁴ Withholding information to gain more leverage was not uncommon among Soviet defectors to the UK and US,⁹⁵ but it is suggestive of other interpretations, including the possibility that their domestic troubles were, if not false, then potentially enlarged to enable the Petrovs to disengage from their interrogation.

Through an interpretive framework of narrative psychology,⁹⁶ we can see Petrova shaping and reshaping her myths and constructing framing devices that bracket her story and prevent us from seeing beyond this version. In her version, she is the principal and entirely innocent victim of the Soviet state and of Vladimir's decision to defect. She recast turning her back on the Soviet state as upholding patriotism to the motherland, a nation disfigured by the Stalinist regime. It seems plausible to suggest that the same abilities of adaptation and accommodation Petrova showed towards the Soviet state she applied adroitly to her new environment in Australia. In this, she was aided, for the rest of her life, by ASIO, which accorded her respect and provided her with advice and support to the end. But Petrova's shifting narrative raises more questions than it answers. We must now consider the possibility that the Petrovs' withheld intelligence from Western security agencies (could this explain why Petrova's family was untouched by her defection?) and that the limited portrait of their activities in Australia may need revision. We end as we began: the shadows of Petrova's life—her ability to evade the Great Terror, her family's continued safety in the USSR despite her defection, her private denigration of Petrov and her public defence of him, her stoicism and her vulnerability, her involvement with at least one target of EM activity, and the fantasies that she spun—throw up more secrets than they divulge. For the biographer, there can be only frustration. There is no singular truth, no 'smoking gun', no capacity to point and declare, only a lingering misgiving that all is not quite as we see it.

94 The monthly reports from MI5's security liaison officer in Australia are frequently punctuated with remarks about both Petrovs 'holding back information'. See, for example, 'Note for PF137694', 4 January 1955, TNA: KV2/3488, folio 413a. On 12 April 1955, the SLO reported to MI5 that 'these defectors know a great deal more about successful Soviet espionage in Australia than they have divulged'. See TNA: KV2/3448, folio 490b [p. 2, para. 6].

95 This also applied to their memoirs; see Jay Bergman, 'The Memoirs of Soviet Defectors: Are They a Reliable Source about the Soviet Union?', *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 31, no. 1 (March 1989), doi.org/10.1080/00085006.1989.11091903.

96 One dimension of narrative theory emphasises the process by which individuals construct a personal identity and a relationship with the political culture they inhabit. It concerns stories that enable individuals to make sense of the world, and how they make sense of and achieve recognition for such stories. The relevant literature in the burgeoning field of narrative theory is vast, but see Jarmila Mildorf, '“Unnatural” Narratives? The Case of Second-Person Narration', in *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, ed. Mari Hatavara, Lars-Christer Hyden and Matti Hyvärinen (Amsterdam, 2013), 179–20, doi.org/10.1075/sin.18.12mil; Peter Poiana, 'Narrative Identity', *Literature and Aesthetics* 9 (1999): 99–121; Joshua A. Wilt, Sarah Thomas and Dan P. McAdams, 'Authenticity and Inauthenticity in Narrative Identity', *Heliyon* 5, no. 7 (2019), doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e02178.

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