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EX-SPIES MEET TO POLISH UP THEIR IMAGES

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NEARLY 40 ex-spies and code-breakers, who long ago left their undercover days behind them, met yesterday in Vermont to share fond memories and boost the sagging image of U.S. intelligence agencies.

"This country has been savaging the intelligence agencies for the last 10 to 15 years. It's time people understand what they are trying to do," said Bill Smith, an ex-intelligence officer from Connecticut.

To help the public learn what the 40 or so U.S. intelligence agencies do and why, Michael Speers of Weston, Vt., organized yesterday's first meeting of the New England chapter of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.

For many members of the organization the meeting at the Village Inn in Landgrove, Vt., was their first opportunity to trade "war stories."

Frank Binder, 62, of Plainfield, Vt., told how "the KGB sentenced me to death, but I failed to show up for them."

A native Czech who worked for the OSS, the forerunner of the CIA during World War II, Binder was a spy during the Soviet takeover of his homeland.

"I was a double agent for about six months after the war until the Russians found out. Then one

morning, I was warned I was going to die that day in an industrial accident.

"I took off in a car with the KGB right behind me. Just like on TV, the KGB agents tried to ram my car, but missed, and ended up crashing on a dead end street," said Binder.

Guest speaker at the meeting was James Bamford of Natick, who told how he battled the Justice Department to publish his controversial book, "The Puzzle Palace" — a first-time ever look at the National Security Agency, the largest intelligence-gathering organization in the Western world.

"The top people at NSA weren't too happy with the book," said Bamford, adding that the agency keeps a file already six inches thick on him.

"And the Justice Department at one point threatened to use the Espionage Act against me if I used some of the documents released to me by the Carter Administration," said Bamford, a lawyer who was in naval intelligence during the 1960s.

Bamford used the documents, he said, but the no action was ever taken against him.

CIA-mom's cover: Son's Cantonese

A CONNECTICUT grandmother was far ahead of her time nearly 30 years ago when she combined a career with raising a family — especially since her job was spying.

Eleanore Hoar of Darien started working for the CIA — for which her husband already worked — after she turned 36 and had two children.

"People are always surprised," said Hoar, at yesterday's Association of Former Intelligence Officers meeting in Landgrove, Vt.

"How do you think they ran an organization like that without a few Mata Haris?" she added laughing.

Hoar, in her sixties, said she spent three years in Hong Kong and some time in Peru during the five years she worked undercover for the CIA.

"I used to take my son, he was 6 or 7 years old then, with me on missions in China," she said. "He had blond curly hair and spoke Cantonese after about three months — the Chinese just loved him.

"And, of course, he got all the attention and nobody noticed me — the perfect diversion."

Hoar and her husband, from whom she is now divorced, didn't tell their parents or children or anybody

else what they did for a living until long after their spying days.

"We just lived two separate lives all in one," explained Hoar.

"My son was so excited when we told him," said the youthful-looking grandmother of four. "He kept asking me, 'Tell me what we were doing there, mommy.'"

Hoar insisted that, "My spying wasn't as dangerous as people think it was. Only a couple of times did it get a little scary when something went bad."

Hoar, who now works with dyslexic schoolchildren, said combining her espionage and child-rearing "wasn't all that difficult. You got terribly good at double talk."

She decided to join the "image-boosting" spy group meeting yesterday because of the way "the press kind of pulled us apart in the 1970s."

"People have to understand that intelligence is eventually the basis of foreign policy — like research for a book," said Hoar.

None of her friends now is in intelligence work or knows about her experiences, so for her, coming to yesterday's meeting was a "little like old home week. A college reunion."

— Timothy Clifford