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Mr. Yurchenko Goes Back Home

Was It Too Much Wine and Not Enough Women?

By Charles Fenyesi



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“We didn’t nail him, but we let him know that we knew all about the American woman,” says one US source. “We developed a working relationship—call it an understanding.” The source will not say whether Yurchenko supplied information or received any money. “He was not really our agent,” the source says, stressing the word “really,” “but he agreed to be in touch with us and be helpful when the opportunity presented itself.” However, when Yurchenko returned to Moscow in 1980, he said that he would be watched closely, that it would be too dangerous for him to have any contact with Americans.

US officials heard nothing from him until July 25, 1985, when he walked up to a Swiss guard in Rome’s Vatican Museum, introduced himself as Colonel Yurchenko of the KGB, and asked to be taken to the American Embassy.

Yurchenko was taken to the Italian police, the Americans were alerted, and he spent a month being debriefed at a US Air Force base in Italy. As a defector, he made a mixed impression. He boasted

that he had just been promoted and was the fifth-most important man in the KGB, which US experts questioned. He claimed he had had to flee Moscow because he was in danger of being identified as an American spy by the KGB’s rival, the military intelligence GRU.

The story seemed implausible, as was his claim that he had signed his own permission to fly to Italy as the security officer for a delegation of Soviet nuclear scientists attending a conference in Sicily. But he did provide some critical information: The counterintelligence bureau he headed had pinpointed the KGB station chief in London, first secretary Oleg Gordievsky, as a Western spy. Alerted, Gordievsky, a British agent for nineteen years, promptly left the embassy and asked for political asylum.

Yurchenko arrived in the US in the last days of August 1985. He was in high spirits. He said he wanted to start a new life; he was done with his wife, with the Soviet regime. “He kept talking, and he tired everyone out,” says one CIA specialist. “He gave us plenty of good information. He seemed to know everything. He was amazing.”

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He also tried to get in touch with the wife of a Soviet diplomat in Canada, with whom he had had an affair in the 1970s, also in Washington. Her reaction was a hysterical rejection, and Yurchenko sank into depression. He became morose and began to drink heavily. He swore at his handlers and demanded to see Casey. In earlier days, Yurchenko had tried to explain the inconsistencies in his testimony; now he turned sullen.

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One afternoon, a group of Russian-speaking visitors suggested to Yurchenko that he would soon be teaching in a nice college, which is what many former Eastern-bloc officials end up doing here. Yurchenko replied that he could never do that, because he could never learn English or catch up with people who had a proper education. "I am ignorant," he said. "I have no future in this

country. I am a nothing."

Yurchenko stunned the CIA when he walked out of a dinner with two of his handlers at the Georgetown restaurant Au Pied de Cochon and took a taxi to the Soviet compound a mile up Wisconsin Avenue. To date, CIA officers are certain that he was a genuine defector and not a KGB plant. One veteran handler calls the redefection "a suicide." A colleague added that it was "an act of extreme desperation" by an unstable personality. "Like many other Russians, Yurchenko is a serf looking for a lord," he says. "He was a poor, lost soul looking for moral authority, and the CIA didn't even provide him with an escort who could tune in on his wavelength."

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“Doby,” as he was known around town, played chess with national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, drank pepper vodka with Dean Rusk, and counted as friends other presidential advisers and Secretaries of State.

If you watched the Soviets come and go from the embassy during the Dobrynin years, as FBI agents have from rented rooms in the University Club and apartment buildings nearby, you would have noticed the arrival several years ago of a new breed of Soviet diplomat. Their role model is the embassy’s second-in-command, Oleg Sokolov, who could be easily mistaken for an Ivy League-educated investment banker in both dress and speech.

Once the uniform of Soviet officials was a drab, ill-fitting suit. Then, about ten years ago, some Soviets adopted a new look: a blue blazer with gray or tan slacks. Now the dress of some of the younger diplomats is even more Western: well-cut suits from Lord & Taylor

for business hours, corduroys and Shetland-wool sweaters for leisure wear.

“We’re getting a new generation of junior diplomats,” notes Dimitri Simes, an émigré who today writes frequently on Soviet-American affairs from his post here at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “They are better educated, more sophisticated, more pragmatic, and more comfortable with Western ways. They are in their late twenties or early thirties, graduates of the Institute of International Relations in Moscow.”

Members of the new breed speak English very well, far better than their American counterparts in Moscow speak Russian, according to American diplomats who have lived in Moscow. Some Soviets perfected their accents as children of diplomats in English-speaking countries. For example, the former Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, Oleg Troyanovsky, spoke flawless English; his father was the Soviet

ambassador to the US in the 1930s, and young Oleg attended prep school in Washington.

There is a tendency on the part of many Washingtonians, especially in the wake of recent stories about Americans arrested for espionage, to assume that a Soviet whose dress is stylish and whose English is fluent is in the spy business.

“Let’s face something,” says Simes. “A junior diplomat in the Soviet Embassy who goes around town and socializes with Americans has to work very closely with the KGB. Here you have an interesting question. Is it really very important whether they are KGB staff officers or if they’re just running errands for the KGB? Bureaucratically, there’s a difference, but operationally, if you’re an American on the receiving end, I don’t know what the difference is. Junior Soviet diplomats are just not in a position to have expense-account lunches or to visit Americans at home unless they are in

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Not that all Washingtonians are put off by contacts with Soviet officials. "Some Americans who hang out with Soviets flatter themselves by thinking they're important enough to have a control agent attached to them," says Strobe Talbott, the bureau chief of *Time* magazine here and a Soviet expert.

But American intelligence officers assume that Soviets cultivate Washingtonians for specific information-gathering purposes, and it's not uncommon for the FBI to chat with any Washingtonian who has regular dealings with Soviets.

Soviet gregariousness does not extend to lower-level personnel or families. Only Soviet journalists and high-ranking embassy officials are permitted to live outside the Mount Alto complex and therefore occasionally entertain Americans in their residences. Some Soviets live near Wisconsin and Western avenues in the Irene or the Willoughby apartments, where one-bedroom rents

can run as high as \$1,000 monthly, an expense paid by the embassy.

While other countries—including the US—encourage their diplomats to cultivate friends in their host country by living around town, the Soviets traditionally group their embassy staffs in compounds. "They want to prevent their people from escaping, from becoming infected," says a retired intelligence official from the State Department.

"They build little fortresses wherever they go," notes a retired CIA Soviet-watcher.

The wives of Soviet Embassy personnel here seem especially vulnerable to the loneliness such enforced isolation can breed, especially if their children are not here. The Soviet school in the Mount Alto compound stops at the seventh grade, when it is mandatory that children return to the motherland for education.

Before she defected, Yelena Mitrokhina attended a meeting of about 30 wives of top-ranking Soviet Embassy off-

icials. The meeting was called by the head of embassy counterintelligence, Vitaly Yurchenko. He had just sent back to Moscow a Soviet woman who had struck up a friendship with an American neighbor, a man with whom she had begun walking and talking.

Yurchenko called the wives together to remind them of "the weaknesses inherent in women" and to warn them "not to succumb." Ironically, it was Yurchenko who later defected—although he returned last year to the arms of the Soviet Embassy to renounce his defection.

Do real friendships ever develop between Washingtonians and Soviets living here?

"If you're talking about pleasant relationships, pleasant casual friendships, I think absolutely," says Simes. "But if you're talking about real friendship, the bottom line is they are officers of the Soviet state, and they would have to do