

KGB agent now says he didn't defect

By Aaron Epstein
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — In a bizarre twist to an extraordinary spy story, high-ranking Soviet KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko said yesterday that he had not defected to the United States as reported, but had been kidnapped, drugged, brought to this country while unconscious and kept captive for months by the CIA.

"On a business trip to Italy, I was forcibly abducted in Rome," Yurchenko said. "I was kept in isolation and forced to take some drugs and denied the opportunity to get in touch with official Soviet representatives."

U.S. officials promptly denied Yurchenko's account, made during a news conference at the Soviet Embassy here. Sen. David Durenberger (R., Minn.), chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, called it "a lot of baloney," adding that Yurchenko was a defector who had "never been held against his will or coerced by any means."

State Department spokesman Charles Redman said Yurchenko's allegations were "completely false and without any foundation. . . . At no time was Mr. Yurchenko held or coerced by improper, illegal or unethical means."

On the contrary, Redman said, on Aug. 1 Yurchenko defected "of his own volition to the American Embassy in Rome." He asked for asylum, "signed a statement to that effect, and asylum was granted."

Yurchenko expressed a desire to return to his wife, 17-year-old son and friends in the Soviet Union. But Redman said the United States would not allow him to leave until U.S. officials meet with him "in an environment free of Soviet coercion to satisfy ourselves . . . that this action is genuinely of his own choosing."

Yurchenko spoke at a hastily called, hour-long news conference at the Soviet Embassy attended by about 25 U.S. and Soviet reporters. He said that despite repeated interrogations by what he termed his U.S.

captors, he did not disclose any Soviet secrets. He said he refused to sign a contract that he said would have provided him with a \$1 million down payment and \$180,000 a year for life.

He said he was kept in isolation under constant guard by six CIA agents at a "safe house" on 500 acres of property 22 miles from Fredericksburg, Va. He called it "a typical example of state-sponsored terrorism."

On Saturday, he said, he took advantage of "a momentary lapse" in security and was able to "break out to freedom," making his way to the Soviet Embassy in the northwest section of Washington. However, he would not provide details of what he termed his capture, escape and inter-

rogation or of a dinner meeting he said he had with CIA Director William J. Casey at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va.

Yurchenko, 50, was believed to be the number-five man in the KGB when he dropped from sight Aug. 1 in Rome and later turned up in the hands of U.S. intelligence operatives. The State Department said he was responsible for KGB intelligence work in the United States and Canada.

There were widespread reports in recent months that in disclosures to U.S. officials, he was fingering Soviet "moles" within the CIA and disclosing other U.S. security problems.

At the same time, however, there was speculation that Yurchenko had come over to the West in a Soviet plot to create chaos in the U.S. intelligence community by spreading deliberately misleading information known as "disinformation."

U.S. authorities said they learned from Yurchenko that Edward L. Howard, 33, a former CIA employee, had sold U.S. intelligence secrets to the Soviet Union. In October, while under FBI surveillance, Howard left his job as an economic analyst for the New Mexico state legislature and vanished. He was last reported to be in Helsinki, Finland.

Yurchenko, a man with slicked-down hair and a drooping mustache who appeared nervous as he told his story in Russian and halting English, said that he was kept "helpless" in "total isolation" at the CIA safe house. He said that one of his guards,

whom he described as "fat, quiet, stupid, unemotional," would not allow him to close the door to the room where he slept.

Durenberger said that on the contrary, Yurchenko was treated as a defector and was given "a certain amount of freedom" by the CIA, which sought "to protect him, not to imprison him."

"This guy is a little bit too smooth. Everything he said about the kidnapping and the drugging flies in the face of everything that has happened over the last few months," Durenberger added.

The senator said that Yurchenko was headed for dinner at the CIA headquarters Saturday night and then disappeared. "Casey gave me the impression that the guy made the decision [to return to the Soviet Union] sometime between Saturday night and this evening," Durenberger said last night. "We can't be 100 percent sure that there wasn't some coercion on the part of the Soviet Union."

A Senate intelligence committee aide said that the entire episode "raises the question of whether the original defection was a ploy all along. But if it was, to what purpose? He gave us accurate information on Howard, which certainly built his credibility. What did they gain out of it? It is absolutely bizarre."

Inquirer Washington Bureau reporters Ellen Warren, James McGregor, Patricia O'Brien and Frank Greve contributed to this article.



William J. Casey

Dinner with KGB agent reported