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FILE ONLY

Ex-Intelligence Officers Call Yurchenko a Plant

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Purported Soviet KGB defector Vitaly Yurchenko probably was a plant whose mission was to penetrate the CIA and trigger congressional hostility against the agency, a group of former intelligence officers speculated Tuesday.

A Panelist Newton S. "Scotty" Miler, a retired CIA agent, said the intelligence community nationwide generally agrees the CIA botched the Yurchenko affair, and "even the CIA knows it," although high-ranking CIA officials still maintain the Russian's information was truthful. "It may have been accurate, but it was also not of any particular importance," Miler said.

Miler participated on a panel of local intelligence experts fielding questions during a luncheon meeting of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.

Yurchenko, who defected to the West last

summer while in Italy, fingered several U.S. citizens spying for the Soviet Union. Among them were Edward Howard of Santa Fe, who worked for the CIA from 1981-83, and fled to Finland in September, and Ronald Pelton, arrested Monday in Annapolis, Md. Pelton worked as a communications specialist for the National Security Agency from 1965-79.

Because Howard and Pelton had no current access to sensitive information, Miler said, the intelligence community's interest in them is "historical."

Another panelist, author Ed Epstein, also questioned the significance of the information Yurchenko was feeding to the CIA after his defection. Yurchenko claimed to be the No. 5 man in the KGB, "but he did not possess the level of information appropriate for someone in that high position in the organization," he said.

Epstein, author of the book, "Legend," which examined the assassination of President Kennedy and the Soviet connection with Lee Harvey Oswald, currently is working on an article about Yurchenko for Life magazine.

He noted that the CIA may not have been completely duped and may have doubted Yurchenko's value. He pointed out that Yurchenko was not kept isolated and had no problem re-defecting.

A further indication that Yurchenko was a plant, Epstein said, was in his willingness to return to the East, knowing how the Soviet Union deals with traitors.

While the CIA got some positive public relations in the wake of Yurchenko's defection, his re-defection may have had the opposite effect, said University of New Mexico political science professor, Dr. Peter Lupsha.

In claiming that the CIA kidnapped him in Rome and kept him drugged until he could escape, it gave the Soviets the opportunity to accuse the United States of human rights violations and state terrorism. The accusations came as President Reagan was preparing for his Geneva summit with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.