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### Defectors Get By With a Little Help From Their Friends

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Few historians have ever described Washington, the city of power, as a place known for its humanity. A story of uncynical, unambitious, uncalculating behavior here is something to be savored—for example, this one.

Recently, Viktor Ivanovich Belenko, who made a well-remembered exit from the Soviet Union a decade ago in the cockpit of his Mig25 jet fighter, passed through Washington on his way to a fishing trip somewhere in the northern woods. (The urge of some men to trail string through water in search of fish is apparently a global phenomenon.)

Belenko, who delivered his prized thunderbird to U.S. intelligence at an air base in Japan, is still described as "under cover."

He has lived since his arrival on Sept. 6, 1976, in relative obscurity in the American West as a well-paid consultant to U.S. intelligence agencies, to the fraternity of U.S. fighter pilots in the Air Force and Navy and to the principal defense contractors who build the high-performance jet fighters that would go up against the Soviet air force in a superpower conflict.

But with the urging and support of a small group of people in Washington, Belenko is planning to come out of the shadows. He is collaborating on a book with San Francisco writer John Joss and would like to talk publicly, according to Joss, about the Soviet system and its "unregenerative" nature. He also would like to film an unusual, "don't-leave-home-without-it" commercial for the American Express card.

In a year of harsh publicity about the Central Intelligence Agency's handling of defectors, Belenko is something of a success story—not necessarily because of anything the CIA did institutionally as part of its relocation program for Soviet defectors, but thanks to a personal network in this federal city and its far-reaching national security bureaucracy.

I first encountered another example of such a network a few months ago when I met Alexandra Costa, the only woman to have defected from the Soviet Embassy in Washington. She is the "lady in the blond

wig" who decided to emerge from eight years of anonymity last November to decry the CIA's handling of Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the KGB colonel who bolted the Soviet apparatus in Rome, but who, after spending three months in the hands of what he described as a rather unpleasant CIA debriefing team, returned to the Soviet Union. (Whether Yurchenko was a genuine defector or a plant is still a matter of debate inside the "intelligence community.")

[The blond wig and sunglasses, worn for a photo session with The Washington Post and for her appearance on ABC News' "Nightline," were a last security barrier Costa used even as she was deciding to go public. They will be gone when her picture appears on the cover of her forthcoming memoir, "Stepping Down From The Star," to be published by Putnam this fall.]

Costa had suffered her own disappointments with the CIA defector program. A highly educated social scientist in Moscow, Yelena Mitrokhina (her Russian name, changed when the CIA gave her a new identity) was offered secretarial school by the CIA's relocation experts. It was only her personal network that saved her.

I met some of its members one night at dinner. There was Jim, the FBI counter-intelligence agent who was there the day Costa came over; there was Lisa, the former CIA case officer who had tried to make up for some of the blunders the agency had committed in Costa's case; and there were assorted new friends that Costa had made after she came back from graduate school and set up a computer consulting business.

They had all helped her or stood up for her at one time or another and they comprised the emotional equivalent of the Russian social family—the Moscow network of friends and relations—which is the hardest thing for many defectors to replace. After a few hours over drinks and dinner, it seemed clear that these Americans took great solace from the bond they had formed with their Russian friend—someone they had helped to cross the cultural bridge from a beloved homeland under Soviet governance to the strange mosaic of the American system.

Though I have not met Belenko, I have spent time talking to members of his net-

work. One of them is retired Air Force colonel George V. Wish, who played control agent and big brother to Belenko during the first difficult years, when the tempestuous youth who grew up in Soviet Siberia (Belenko was in his late 20s when he defected) encountered such things as the American shopping mall, Las Vegas and rock 'n' roll.

At one point, it had seemed that Belenko could not accept that America was real—could not understand it, could not reconcile the sensory glitter with the poverty-stricken and decadent slums he had read about in Soviet propaganda. That was when Wish had taken a big chance and handed Belenko the keys to a Dodge Charger and told him to get out of Washington and find America for himself.

After a few scrapes that are still buried in classified files, Belenko returned and declared that he had fallen in love with a waitress from a Midwest diner. (They later married). Wish, who lives in Annandale, still sees Belenko when he passes through Washington on regular trips to the Pentagon. The bond is still there, friends say.

Also in Washington is Navy Capt. Ernie Christensen, renowned fighter pilot and former commanding officer of the "Top Gun" fighter pilot school at Miramar Naval Air Station in California. Christensen introduced Belenko to several "Top Gun" classes.

Perhaps one of Belenko's closest friends and fishing companions is the legendary American fighter jock, Chuck Yeager, who this year has twice tramped up into the Sierra Nevada mountains to test the waters with the 38-year-old Belenko.

So when Belenko arrived in Washington for a small party in early May, a small group of his friends, some of them former CIA officials who had been with him in the beginning, gathered round to hear his plans and give him advice. It was in that Washington parlor that his friends helped him refine the script of his coming-out commercial with American Express.

Continued



**ALEXANDRA COSTA**

**... defector emerged as a critic incognito**

Since there are no Mig25's available for such a commercial (the U.S. and Japanese governments returned Belenko's Mig after they had disassembled it and studied it thoroughly), the scene would open with the roar of a supersonic fighter—nationality indistinguishable. After the plane swooped down from the sky, the camera would focus on the canopy as the fighter taxied to a halt, invisible hydraulics lifting the glass bubble to expose the pilot, a red star prominent on his helmet.

The viewer would see Belenko take off his oxygen mask and say in heavily accented English, "You are not knowing me, but as a Soviet pilot . . ."

At the conclusion, Belenko would hold up the American Express card and give his particularly Russian rendition of the banking conglomerate's slogan: "Not leaving home without it."

American Express, which operates a worldwide network of offices, including many in Soviet Bloc countries, wrote Belenko's agent that they loved the idea, but Belenko "did not quite fit our profile."

Belenko's Washington network is working on other ideas.