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The Defector: Tales From the Other Side

Yelena Mitrokhina, Remembering the Dark Secrets

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You know Yelena Mitrokhina.

She's the Woman in the Blond Wig.

One August afternoon seven years ago, while her husband was working at the Soviet Embassy, she met with four FBI agents and drove off in a taxi. She was the first person ever to defect from the Soviet Embassy in Washington.

Two weeks ago when high-ranking KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko walked away from his CIA handlers in a Georgetown bistro and made headlines by redefecting, Yelena Mitrokhina donned a frumpy blond wig and sunglasses and, for the first time, spoke out in public, appearing on ABC's "Nightline," Cable News Network and the front page of The Washington Post. Although there is no way to check all the details of her story as she tells it, sources including the FBI and the Wharton School of Business, where she earned a degree in 1980, confirm Yelena's saga. She became an American citizen last year.

In her way, Yelena Mitrokhina knew Vitaly Yurchenko like no one else:

"My closest encounter with Mr. Yurchenko was in October 1977. He was head of embassy counterintelligence. There had been a woman, an embassy wife, who had struck up a friendship with an American neighbor. She started seeing him, quite openly, just walking together, talking. When Yurchenko found out, she was sent home to Moscow within 24 hours.

"By that time I was in a similar situation. I was very friendly with an American man. He was my car dealer. I had a lot of problems and thought I could confide in him. The night that woman was sent home, Yurchenko called a meeting of all embassy wives. He started talking about the weakness inherent in women, about how we must not succumb.

"Have you ever been in a theater and you get the feeling that the actor is talking directly at you and no one else? That was how I felt. I thought Yurchenko knew all about

me. I sat there, with 30 other women in the room, the wives of all the most powerful Russian diplomats in Washington, and I thought to myself, 'Well, Yelena, you're next.'"

In her wig and sunglasses, Yelena Mitrokhina suggests Tony Curtis' drag performance in "Some Like It Hot." In reality, she is dark-haired, dark-eyed, attractive and smartly dressed. Her English would shame a native.

"My friends say that I was born in Russia only by accident," she says. "And they're right. I was born to live in America." Yelena says, "I did not want to spend my life working for a system. I wanted to live for myself."

Born 41 years ago in Leningrad, she grew up a privileged and only child. Her father was an air force colonel "whose philosophy was the front page of Pravda." Her mother was more irreverent, "a free spirit who taught me how to live my own life."

Yelena, like many Russians, favors a certain bluntness of speech. She is not shy, announcing "that I got straight As in school. I have an IQ of 154." At the University of Leningrad she studied Norwegian and English. She worked summers as an interpreter for visiting delegations from Norway, Britain and the United States. "I guess that's when I first got a taste for the West," she says. "It wasn't really political, it was the people I met, their openness."

At 19, Yelena married the son of a prominent Soviet writer, "a kind of playboy" who was later diagnosed as schizophrenic. "I was very much in love with him, but we just could not live together," she says. "He threatened me and almost killed me. We divorced after a year. I was devastated."

While a graduate student in sociology, she met Lev Mitrokhina, a professor at the Academy of Sciences. As soon as he could divorce his first wife, they married in 1970. Yelena was again a member of the privileged class, the *nomenklatura*.

"People who know that I'm a defector assume that I was a dissident," she says, "but I was never anything close to that when I was living in Russia. I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. When I moved to Moscow with my husband, my status just went up. Lev was a member of the Russian old boys' network. He'd been in charge of propaganda when he was young and in the Komsomol [Communist Party youth organization]. We had a car, good food, a nice apartment. Like any Russian with a little money and brains, I could get lots of foreign goods. I don't ever remember wearing any Soviet-made clothes."

One of Lev Mitrokhina's "old-boy" friends in 1975 was Boris Pankin, head of the newly formed Soviet copy-right agency. Pankin asked Lev to become a first secretary at the embassy in Washington and open a copy-right office on K Street. Yelena was delighted.

"At the embassy you get the best of the two worlds," she says. "You live with diplomatic immunity, a free apartment, medical care and an environment of familiar Russian people. The majority of the intellectual elite in Moscow paled by comparison with the top rank of diplomats in Washington.

"We had access to so many more books, to magazines and journals and the television news. I remember some friends and I played a game by comparing an issue of Pravda and The Washington Post, and we discovered that in Russia certain events just do not exist. And the TV! I remember 'The Six Million Dollar Man' was very big. We would race back from Pioneer Point [the Soviet "dacha" in Maryland] on Sunday nights to watch it. I guess we didn't know about reruns yet."

There were a few restrictions. Embassy personnel were not allowed to have credit cards or checkbooks. "We always carried cash," Yelena says. "That made us the best mugging targets in the city."

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