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KGB agent returns to Soviet fold

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WASHINGTON — Vitaly Yurchenko, a high-level Soviet KGB officer who was reported by the State Department to have defected to the United States, turned up at the Soviet Embassy yesterday and claimed that he had been drugged, kidnapped and offered \$1 million to cooperate with the CIA.

The State Department said Yurchenko's charges were "completely false." One senator called his story "baloney" and said CIA officials weren't sure Yurchenko was acting voluntarily when he made his allegations during an extraordinary press conference at the embassy.

The State Department said Yurchenko would not be permitted to leave the United States until he provides assurances that a decision to return to the Soviet Union is "genuinely of his own choosing."

Yurchenko repeatedly described his ordeal as "state-sponsored terrorism" and told of being drugged before meeting with CIA director William Casey.

Yurchenko denied that he knowingly gave US officials any Soviet secrets. He said he did not know who abducted him, but he discussed in detail what he said were CIA efforts to sign him to a lucrative lifetime contract in return for working with US intelligence.

"I was kept in isolation and forced to take some drugs and denied the opportunity to get in touch with official Soviet representatives," Yurchenko charged.

A Soviet official who introduced Yurchenko said the embassy's charge d'affaires was lodging a strong protest with the State Department.

Yurchenko said that on Saturday, due to "a momentary lapse" in his supervision, he was able to "break out to freedom" and go to the embassy in the northwest section of Washington. But Sen. David Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Yurchenko simply went out to dinner Saturday night and disappeared.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), the panel's vice chairman, told reporters that Yurchenko either was trying to get back in the good graces of the Soviet Union "or he was a double agent all along."

Was he a Soviet plant, sent in to cause an intelligence uproar? "I think that's highly unlikely but not to be dismissed," said Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), former vice chairman of the panel.

Yurchenko, 50, had been thought to be one of the highest-ranking Soviet officials to defect in recent years. He was described as the No. 5 man in the Soviet intelligence service at the time he defected in Rome in early August.

"Mr. Yurchenko was specifically responsible for the direction of KGB intelligence operations in the US and Canada," the State Department said on Oct. 11.

State Department spokesman Charles Redman said last night that Yurchenko "defected of his own volition to the American Embassy in Rome, Italy."

"At no time was Mr. Yurchenko held or coerced by improper, illegal, or unethical means. It is Mr. Yurchenko's right to return to the Soviet Union once the United States government is, in fact, assured that this action is genuinely of his own choosing," Redman said.

Yurchenko said, "At the moment my only wish is to return as soon as possible to my country, my family, my kin and my friends" in the Soviet Union.

Durenberger told reporters on Capitol Hill that "the CIA is surprised at this as anyone else. . . . Nobody can have a clear opinion right now as to why he's doing what he's doing."

CIA spokeswoman Patti Volz said the agency would have no comment, but Durenberger called Yurchenko's claim about being drugged "a lot of baloney."

"At no time have any of the things he alleged happened to him actually happened to him," Durenberger said.

Earlier yesterday, Dave Holliday, a spokesman for the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he had been told by the CIA that Yurchenko had redefected to the Soviet Union, but that wasn't the story Yurchenko told:

● "On a business trip to Italy [in August] I was forcibly abducted in Rome," he said. He did not say by whom but later he talked about conversations he held with CIA officials.

● Of his alleged meeting with Casey, Yurchenko said, "Later I have only vague recollections of the conversation but it was a general conversation of vague policy issues regarding the summit, the things they usually write about in the newspapers."

● He would not confirm that he worked for the KGB. "I know I'm not going to make any comments about spying business," he said.

● He would not give details of his alleged escape, saying only, "I am very proud that I managed to escape, but I won't tell you how."

Early in the news conference, which lasted almost an hour, Yurchenko went out of his way to tweak the CIA, describing a conversation he said he held with a "Mr. Gerber," whom he identified as chief of the CIA's Soviet department.

He said Gerber told him there were requests to interview Yurchenko from American journalists. Then Yurchenko said at the press conference at the Soviet Embassy: "I follow my promise now." He said reporters could get confirmation of that anecdote from Gerber himself except "I'm sure he's very busy now."

While alleging he was a victim of torture, Yurchenko offered few specifics.

Yurchenko said he was asked to cooperate and in return was offered \$1 million tax-free, plus salary and benefits totaling \$180,000 a year for the rest of his life. The benefits, he said, were to include free medical care and furniture.

Yurchenko said he was held in a safe house out Route 17, 22

miles from Fredericksburg, Va.

Yurchenko, describing what he referred to as "three horrible months for me," made an opening statement in halting English but then answered questions from the hastily assembled reporters in Russian and had his remarks translated through an interpreter.

Yurchenko said that to his knowledge he had not cooperated with American authorities.

"In the period when I was conscious and in control of my behavior, I did not pass any secret information," he said. ". . . When I was drugged . . . I don't know what I was doing or saying. . . . I was threatened."

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He said his captors hoped to persuade him that he had given secret information to them.

They showed him papers "which were written in my hand" and said "everyone thinks you are a traitor," he said.

Extensive interrogation

"They were trying to say everybody will believe what they were saying. . . . They, I think, were hoping I eventually will start to believe that I had indeed passed some information of a secret nature."

Yurchenko had been undergoing extensive interrogation by the CIA at an undisclosed location, US officials had said.

Acting on his information, US authorities said they learned that Edward L. Howard, a former CIA employee, sold intelligence secrets to the Soviet Union. Howard, a 33-year-old economic analyst for the New Mexico Legislature, vanished in early October while under FBI surveillance and was last reported to be in Helsinki, Finland.

US government sources said Yurchenko identified another American who had been working for the KGB, but no arrests have yet resulted from Yurchenko's information.

Yurchenko said that US officials brought him newspapers with accounts of his telling US authorities about Howard.

"They brought these to me and were looking at me like a zoo animal. They were thinking I'd be shocked at the secrets I'd disclosed," he said. But he said, "I heard the name of Howard for the first time from the newspapers."

US sources had said that Yurchenko did not know Howard's real name but had only been able to describe him to them by his code name Robert and by details of his life. Those details were enough to lead them to Howard, the sources said.