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Special to The New York Times

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LOS ANGELES, June 11— A former Soviet diplomat who defected to the United States in 1971 says that Yuri V. Andropov, who is regarded as a possible successor to Leonid I. Brezhnev, has long been fascinated by the United States and has more than a casual understanding of its culture and its political realities.

"For example, I think he's likely to be more understanding than the present Soviet leadership of the internal constraints in this country, of the political facts," remarked the former Soviet diplomat, Vladimir Sakharov, who said

that he had known Mr. Andropov in Moscow while a friend of his son, Igor.

Mr. Sakharov commented in an interview that Mr. Andropov, in addition to being aware of the political situation in the United States, was interested in American popular music, favored Western alcoholic beverages such as Scotch and French cognac and had Western books in his home library ranging from "How Green Was My Valley," by Richard Llewellyn, to "Valley of the Dolls" by Jacqueline Susann.

Stepped Down as K.G.B. Chief

Mr. Andropov, who will be 68 on Tuesday, stepped down last month as head of

the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence and state security agency, after he was reappointed to the Communist Party's 10-member Secretariat, which manages party day-to-day affairs.

Mr. Andropov left the Secretariat in 1967 when he was appointed to take over the secret police. In 1973 he became a full member of the party's policy-making Politburo. His withdrawal this year from the police post was interpreted by some analysts in the West as a prelude to a bid to succeed Mr. Brezhnev.

Mr. Sakharov, the son of a diplomatic courier, said that after graduation from Moscow's Institute of International

Relations, he served from 1967 to 1971 as a junior diplomatic officer in Yemen, Egypt and Kuwait.

While in Yemen, he said, he was recruited by the K.G.B. and later, after becoming a K.G.B. agent, he was approached by the United States Central Intelligence Agency. Operating as a double agent, he supplied the C.I.A. with information about Soviet affairs for more than two years before defecting to escape a transfer back to Moscow.

Mr. Sakharov said that he defected because of distaste for the police state atmosphere in his homeland. Now 37 years old, he lives with his American wife in a Los Angeles suburb.

The former diplomat said that he first met Mr. Andropov's son in 1961, when both were accepted by the Institute of International Relations. Mr. Sakharov

said that he often visited the Andropov home and met Igor's father there.

"He arranged for his son to get in the American studies group at the institute, which I think was very significant," he said. "It was next to impossible to get into the American group but his father succeeded in placing him there. He had a great interest in the United States and must have seen a great future for Igor in American studies."

During visits to the Andropov home, Mr. Sakharov, himself a fan of American music, said he saw records of the Glenn Miller Orchestra and other American bands that Mr. Andropov, who speaks English, brought home to Moscow from trips abroad. It was unusual and significant, Mr. Sakharov suggested, for a senior Soviet official to keep such items from the West because

they are frowned on and in some cases prohibited.

Although Mr. Andropov's appointment to head the K.G.B. was announced in 1967, Mr. Sakharov said he believed the appointment could have been made secretly in 1964 or 1965 "because I remember a party we had about then to celebrate his appointment."

Mr. Sakharov, who said he never encountered Mr. Andropov again after going to work for the K.G.B., added:

"I don't want to glamorize him. He is an ideologue deeply rooted in the real Russian culture. But I think he is more sophisticated and open-minded than any Soviet leader. He knows how to keep people under control and how to give and take at the same time."