



Russian humorist Emil Draitser; by UPI

The Moscow Yockline

Emil Draitser and the Ironic Curtain

By Terrance W. McGarry

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Have you heard the joke from Afghanistan, comrade? Or the one about Brezhnev's shoes?

Well, Nicolai Abbatchekov asks Vladimir Costellovich:

"Why are our troops staying so long in Afghanistan?"

Reply:

"They are looking for the people who invited them."

That is the first Russian joke about Afghanistan to reach the Western world, says Emil Draitser, a former Moscow comedy writer who now keeps track of underground Russian humor from Los Angeles, aided by his joke-intelligence network behind the ironic curtain.

But Draitser, a scholar of the subject, recognized it instantly:

"This is an old joke. I heard it years ago about Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia.

"Many underground jokes have been in existence for many years and the names and places change to fit new circumstances and persons," he said.

"When I first got to the West five years ago I read some emigre journals published 50 years ago. Some of the jokes I had heard from friends in Moscow just the month before.

"In Russia, we can recycle the jokes that are never printed or heard on radio or television."

For instance:

Why is there always a meat shortage in Moscow?

We are moving toward Communism so fast the animals cannot keep up.

Draitser, 42, a professor of Russian literature at UCLA, was for more than 10 years a humor writer for Russian publications including *Izvestia*, the humor magazine "Krokodil" and Soviet movies and television.

A satire on a play backfired. Krokodil published it just as the playwright was promoted to a high-ranking editorship. Draitser was suddenly "unemployable." In 1974 he came to the United States.

Why America?

Thank fellow satirist Art Buchwald, he says. "Buchwald is widely known in Russia because they print all his columns making fun of the White House, the CIA. Things like that.

"I thought 'oh God, they have such freedom there.' In Russia you would be in jail for even thinking such things as Buchwald does, much less writing them.

"What amazes me about America is the level of what is permitted. My totalitarian mind still is not used to such frontal attacks on governmental personalities."

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While working on his doctoral dissertation on Russian satire, and a collection of stories on "America through the eyes of a Russian," he has published a book-length collection of underground jokes, titled "Forbidden Laughter."

He keeps abreast of the latest on the Moscow yokline through coded letters from fellow humorists in the Soviet Union. He does not fear for them, he said, because "so far, I'm not on the (KGB) list of dangerous people. They have more important people than me to go after."

Showing a keen appreciation for the values of publicity in the capitalist publishing world, he added:

"But I imagine if I would be kidnapped by the KGB my little book would sell in the millions right away."

"I tour the United States and behind me I hear people whisper, 'A Russian humorist? There is such a thing?' The book should convince Americans that Russians are not humorless."

Stalin has long been a target for jokes, and Leonid Brezhnev is now widely mocked for senility, Draitser said.

Witness these:

Brezhnev arrives at the Kremlin wearing a yellow shoe and a black shoe.

Aide: "Do not worry, Comrade Chairman. We will send the chauffeur for other shoes."

Brezhnev: "That won't help. The other pair looks just like these."

When Soviet tourists come to the United States, said Draitser, "They look for this book. If I could publish this in Russia, I would be a millionaire, but there is a paradox — if I could publish this, there would be no jokes."

Some examples of underground Russian jokes, from Russian humorist Emil Draitser, author of "Forbidden Laughter":

Jew asking KGB for permission to emigrate to Israel:

"Every night my neighbor bangs on the wall and yells 'as soon as we put an end to the Soviet regime we'll take care of you Jews!'"

KGB official: "Why leave the best country in the world for that? The regime will last forever."

Jew: "That's my second reason."

Brezhnev to cosmonauts:

"The Americans were first to land on the moon, so we will be the first to land on the sun."

Cosmonauts: "Comrade, we will be burned to death."

Brezhnev: "Do you think we know nothing? We arranged for you to land at night."

If Communism does take over the world, where will we buy wheat?

Stalin speech to masses: "I am prepared to give my blood for the working class, drop by drop."

Voice from audience: "Why drag things out, beloved comrade? Give it all at once."

Pravda reporting two-man foot race between President John Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev, won by Kennedy:

"Our beloved Nikita Sergelvitich won a respectable second, but the American president barely managed to finish next to last."

Prisoner to cellmate:

"Why are you doing 10 years?"

"Laziness."

"How come?"

"I sat and told jokes to my friends. I was going to report them to the secret police for listening but it was late and I thought I'd go tomorrow. So I was arrested at 3 in the morning because my friends got there first."