



Anne Knudsen/Herald Examiner

People tell Emil Draitser they are surprised Russian humor exists.

A bundler of laughs from the Soviet underground

By Carol A. Crotta
Herald Examiner staff writer

Pssst, comrades — want to hear big Soviet Union joke?

Two rabbits meet on the road during the Stalinist terror of 1937. "Where are you going in such a hurry?" one rabbit asks the other.

"What's wrong with you?" asks the second rabbit. "Haven't you heard? There's a rumor going around that all camels are to be castrated."

"But you're not a camel," says the first rabbit.

The second rabbit replies: "After they catch you and castrate you, try to prove that you're not a camel!"

Yes, as expected, humor in the Soviet Union appears to be as cheerful as the wheat futures. Some may say anyone who tells a joke like that *deserves* 25 years imprisonment, but this joke is a prime example of Soviet underground humor — underground, as in unofficial and therefore punishable under Soviet law. So says Emil Draitser, teaching fellow of Slavic languages and literature at UCLA, and perhaps the Western world's chief compiler of Soviet jokes.

"When I go on lecture tour," the

42-year-old Draitser says, "people say, 'Russian humor? Does such a thing exist?'"

Indeed it does. Draitser, who emigrated from the USSR in 1974, has a file drawer full of Soviet underground jokes, "a couple of thousand maybe." Some untranslatable due to linguistic twists and turns and topicality. Some not funny. And a few that make the transition to English and are published in his 1978 book, "Forbidden Laughter: Soviet Underground Jokes," recently reprinted in a bilingual, paperback edition.

"If I could publish this in Russia, I be millionaire," says Draitser. "When Soviet tourists come here they look for this book. But paradox is this — if I could publish, there would be no jokes. You see?"

We checked with Draitser for his latest Afghanistan jokes, which would come by way of his chief source, a close friend and fellow satirist still in the USSR who smuggles jokes out to him using their own special code. Apparently, however, Afghanistan isn't much of a laughing matter. Not yet, anyway.

"It takes time to produce Afghanistan jokes," Draitser says.

Jokes/B-7 Col. 4

"But in 1968, when Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, there was a joke, 'Why the Soviets staying so long?' 'They are looking for the people who invited them in.' This is appropriate, I would say."

Draitser, born in Odessa, worked as an editor in a large publishing house and as a satirist for the Soviet humor magazine "Krokodil." His decision to emigrate with his wife and young son involved several factors: his gradual disillusionment with the system and its seemingly irreconcilable problems, the fact that he is a Jew, which, despite the privileges afforded him by his journalist status, made him "always feel like a second-class citizen," and one crucial mistake he had made. The author of a play he satirized for "Krokodil" was promoted to the untouchable rank of chief editor of a central magazine just before publication of the article. Draitser found himself blacklisted for two years.

In America, he finds "This country a little bit crazy on humor. A little obsessed, I think." But so are his people, who have "a very keen sense of humor," he says.

"The first thing (Soviet) people say to each other, 'have any new jokes?' Then later they ask, 'how's your wife?' It's political editorial, it's entertainment which is scarce in Soviet Union. Life in Russia is boredom, believe me."

The boredom is eased a bit at private parties, where, as *New York Times* Washington bureau chief Hedrick Smith chronicled in his book, "The Russians," the radio is turned up loudly, a pillow is put over the telephone, and the unofficial jokes come pouring forth. Invitation to such a party is a true test of friendship and loyalty, Draitser says.

"If you are invited and there are jokes, it means everybody is trusted. Risk is when you tell it on street, in office, where others can hear. But there is joke, two prisoners talk to each other and one asks, 'What for you got 10 years in prison?' 'For laziness.' 'How come?' 'I sat and I told jokes to my friends. When it got late, I thought, Oh, I should go and inform secret police. But then it was so late and I thought, I'll go in the morning. So I went to bed instead and at 3 in morning, secret police come and arrest me.'"

Some of the most sacrilegious jokes concern the deified Soviet leaders. The Lenin Cult, according to Smith, which accords all good things in the world as the work of Lenin, spawned its own antidote in Lenin humor, such as a fictional talcum powder named "Lenin's Ashes," and a bed for three called "Lenin Is Always With Us." Lenin humor, Draitser finds, is a fairly recent phenomenon.

"For a certain period of time, people considered Lenin a saint. I find very few jokes on Lenin before '60s, just because ideals of revolution started then to fall. In '60s, first time in Soviet Union since 1917 there was no real good excuse for the low standard of life. There was first World War, then second World War and devastation of country. In '50s, people still could buy it. But in '60s, we see West Germany, defeated by us, and also Japan, and how much better than us they are doing! They are so much better than us! No more excuse! Then jokes about Lenin came."

Stalin, a figure in disrepute, is a particular target, but the best time of all is had with the Abbott and Costello of the Politburo — President (and one of the best straight men in the business) Alexei Kosygin and the doddering Premier Leonid Brezhnev.

"Brezhnev is laughing stock now. Latest jokes are about his senility. Brezhnev came to his job wearing one yellow shoe and one black. Kosygin says, 'What's the matter with you?' Brezhnev says, 'Oh, what should I do?' Kosygin says, 'Don't worry, we will send chauffeur to your house to get your shoes.' Brezhnev says, 'Oh no, that won't fix it because there I also have a pair like this!'"

"Another one is there is knock on door in the middle of the night. Brezhnev wakes up, turns on light, finds his glasses, looks for a little piece of paper and carries it to front door. He opens door and reads paper: 'Who is there?'"

As many kicks as Brezhnev may be, some of the Soviet Union's best underground humor is directed at the foibles of the system — take the eternal problem of lines, for example. "Even projected in future, the line is so connected with Soviet system you cannot imagine life without it. Recent joke is that people opened an abortion clinic in Moscow with minimum waiting time two years."

The United States, if you can believe it, gets off easy in underground humor circles, despite the fact that political satirist Art Buchwald's anti-government and anti-Pentagon columns are quickly translated and disseminated in the Soviet Union. Says Draitser, "I didn't see any underground bad jokes about United States. America is always good guy, much wealth, good life, although sometimes problems are joked about in pretty ironical way. Like this joke: One Jew in Russia meets another Jew. 'How your life?' one asks. 'Oh, perfectly OK. One son is engineer, daughter is doctor, but one son is rotten apple. He emigrated to America and is unemployed."

"But to tell you truth, if it wasn't for the food packages he sends us every month, we'd all starve to death."

And then there's the one about the continuing Communist revolution — if Communism does take over the world, where are we going to go to buy wheat? A little of this may seem like the-grass-is-greener wistfulness. After all, we *do* have our problems over here, too, as Draitser heartily concurs. "Some of them are not only Soviet, because there are problems in any big system. America is not paradise. But it is purgatory rather than hell."