

In the Jaws of the Crocodile

A Soviet Memoir

Emil Draitser

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The human race has only one really effective weapon,
and that is laughter.

—MARK TWAIN

Even he who doesn't fear anything else in the world fears ridicule.

—NIKOLAI GOGOL

We need [Soviet] Gogols. . . . We need [Soviet Saltykov-] Shchedrins.

—JOSEPH STALIN

We are all for [satirical] laughter!
But we need kinder Shchedrins
And such Gogols that wouldn't bother us.

—YURI BLAGOV, *Soviet writer*

To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it.

—CHARLIE CHAPLIN

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Preface

Chronologically (if not thematically), this volume is a sequel to my memoir *Shush! Growing up Jewish under Stalin* (University of California Press, 2008). By the same token, it is a prequel to my autobiographical novel, *Farewell, Mama Odessa* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), in which I describe my emigration experience.

It takes a village to raise a child; so it does to bring a manuscript to maturity. My former comrades-in-satirical-arms Arkady Polishchuk and Grigory Kroshin (né Kremer) helped to revive many details of events and circumstances of bygone years ~~me for~~ and shared their recollections of adventures in the Soviet satirical scene.

My friends Dr. Richard Sogluizzo, Dr. Anthony Saidy, Dr. Gary Kern, and Nina Prays read several chapters of the manuscript and offered their feedback.

I also appreciate Emily Corvi's fine-tuning my command of idiomatic English.

Gena Fischer served as my beta reader of the whole manuscript to ensure that it was ready to face the outside world.

I also enjoyed the help of my brother, Vladimir, especially his expertise in picture file formatting and in fighting computer glitches, which spring up in the most critical moments.

A separate thank you goes to Dr. Jolanta Kunicka. Being months on end next to a writer going through creative torments isn't an enviable lot by any means. I appreciate her patience and care, as well as her hands-on assistance with the manuscript.

Gwen Walker, the former executive acquisition editor at the University of Wisconsin Press, became enthusiastic upon reading my proposal, asked for the whole manuscript, and passed it on to my peer reviewers,

Dr. Jarrod Tanny, Dr. Boris Dralyuk, and Dr. Anna Shternshis. Their appraisal of my manuscript helped it to take its current shape. Whatever mistakes might spring up in the final text are of my making.

I am also thankful to Grigory Kroshin, Arkady Polishchuk, Nancy I. Suslov, Mark Russell, and Joel Buchwald for their permission to use their (or their loved ones') pictures in this book. For various reasons, some names of real people described in this book are altered.

In the Jaws of the
Crocodile

Prologue

“Hey, Dad,” my son Max says during our lunch at a Westwood Village café, basking in the proverbial Californian sun. “Is it true that, back in your Soviet days, you wrote what . . . satires? Did I get it right? Well, forgive me, but it’s weird. . . . ‘Soviet satire’ sounds like a contradiction in terms.”

Talk about a generation gap! In my case, it’s not even a gap; it’s an abyss. Though born in Moscow, Max was just fifteen months old when, in October 1974, we left the former Soviet Union. He is as American as apple pie! (If not pie, then strudel—that’s what his grandmother used to bake for him while he was growing up on American soil.)

Max visited his native land only when he was in his late twenties. It happened after the Soviet Union had already collapsed under its own weight. My son saw a land quite different from the one his father had inhabited before emigrating. The Moscow he visited as an adult was a far cry from the Moscow I knew during the Soviet era. Mine was a land of perennial shortages of goods and services. The Moscow he arrived in had already been populated with McDonald’s, Burger King, and department stores rivaling Macy’s. This doesn’t even include nightclubs or other trappings of capitalism. Back in my Soviet life, I saw such things for a split second when watching the newsreels of the *Foreign Newsreel* (Inostrannaya kinokhronika). They were filled with heartbreaking stories of life in the rotten West.

As an American, my son finds it hard to fathom that such a thing as “Soviet satire” existed. How could a totalitarian state tolerate public criticism? How could it encourage this criticism by putting professional satirists on its payroll?

The truth of the matter is that, in my time, there was a plethora of satirical outlets in the country. Many Soviet newspapers published satirical columns, called feuillets. The main satirical magazine, *Crocodile*,

КРОКОДИЛ

ГОД ИЗДАНИЯ ПЯТЫЙ

№ 30

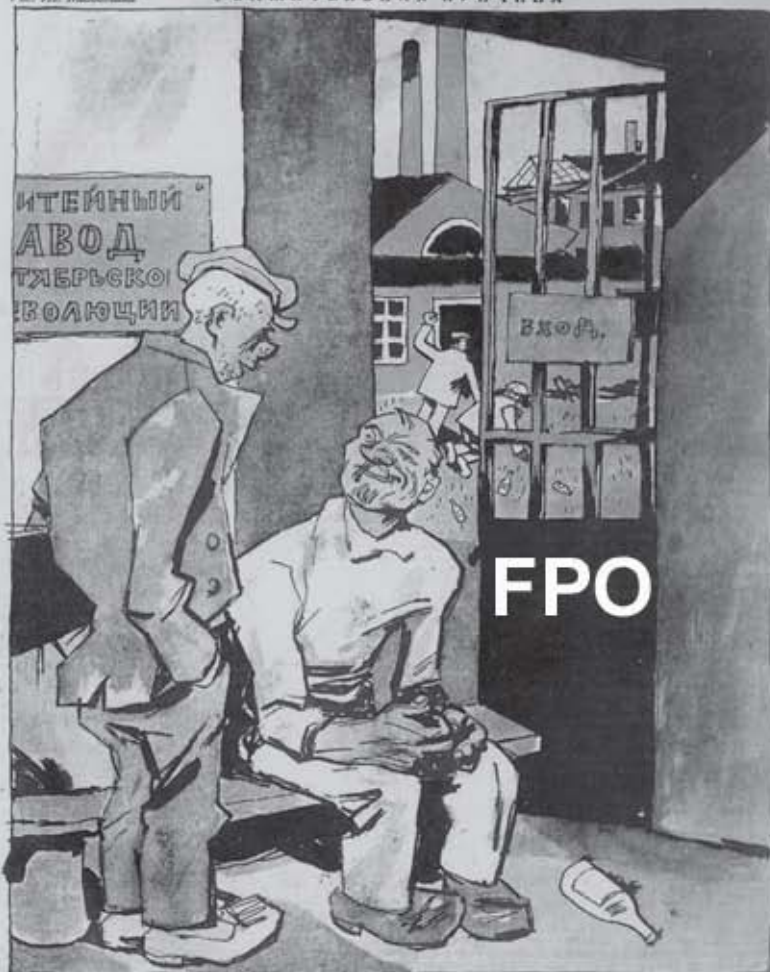
МОСКВА,
АВГУСТ 1928 г.

Продается во всех магазинах

Цена 12 коп.

Рис. Ив. Малецкого

УВАЖИТЕЛЬНАЯ ПРИЧИНА

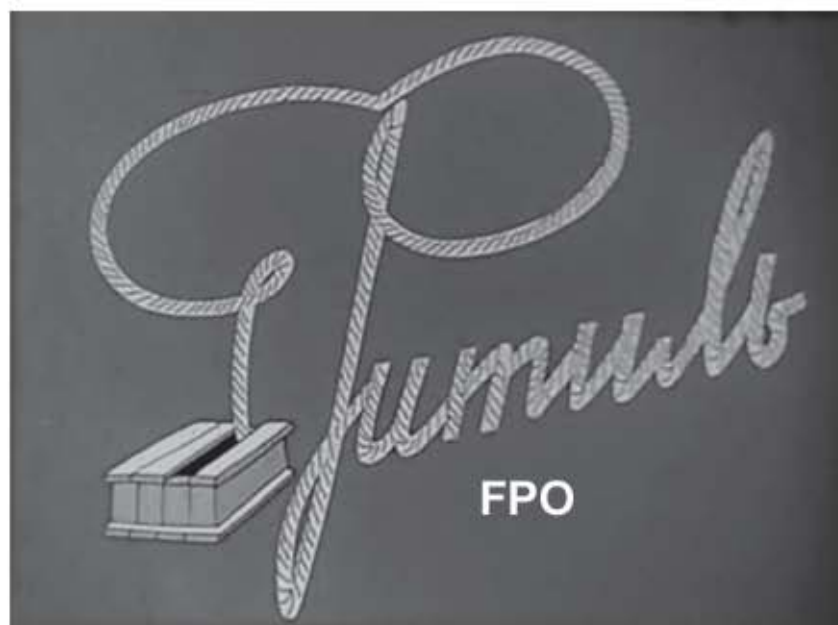


— Почему у нас не работают? Разве сегодня праздник?
— Нет, но зато вчера был праздник!

A cover of *Crocodile* magazine

came out three times a month, six million copies each time. It was way more popular than its American counterparts *National Lampoon* and *Mad Magazine*, even in their heydays. And that's not counting the several *Crocodile* spinoffs published in the languages of the Soviet republics. There were also satirical programs on Moscow Radio and on local and central TV stations. Beginning in the early 1960s, the Mosfilm Studios produced the satirical newsreel *The Wick* (Fitil'). Its name derives from the expression *ustavit' fitil'*, to give somebody a good working over. Screened in movie theaters before the main features, the newsreels enjoyed tremendous popularity.

An army of satirists worked in the censored Soviet media. Like its namesake—the real-life beast whose jaws crunch over its prey with several dozens of constantly replaceable saber-sharp teeth—besides its forty-some staff members, the satirical magazine *Crocodile* used more than two hundred freelancers. Many more contributed to other satirical outlets—newspapers, radio, movies, and TV programs. For the ten years of my life before emigrating in late 1974, I was one of the foot soldiers in that satirical army. Besides *Crocodile* and *The Wick*, my work appeared in such



The title sequence of the satirical newsreel *The Wick* (Fitil')

All-Union publications as the magazine *Youth* and the newspapers *Literary Gazette*, *Izvestiya*, *Komsomol Pravda*, *Labor* (Trud), in Republican ones (*Soviet Russia*, *Literary Russia*), and in local publications in Moscow, Kazan, Saratov, Riga, and my home town, Odessa. I also wrote scripts for short satirical features for TV and Central Radio.

Only recently, after living in America half of my life, I pondered that part of my career. It took a while to figure out how it all had happened. Why had I attached myself to the strange animal called “Soviet satire”?

It took some relentless soul-searching to realize it had happened because, early in my life, I had given in to my secret passion, which was irrational and all-consuming—as all passions are.