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## “He’s Abroad? I’m the One Who’s Abroad”

### Contemporary Jokes Told by Russian Jews

#### | Protest Humor

Russian folkloric denunciation of a target group is often contested. In many cases, there exists an indigenous folk response in kind to Russian humor—“protest humor,” as Donald Simmons (567–70) calls a similar phenomenon. While the Russian calls a Georgian a “mustached southerner,” the Georgian refers to “a Russian Vanya” (*rusuli Vanya*), which connotes a boorish simpleton. As the Russians call the Ukrainians *khokhly*, the latter have two derogatory nicknames for the Russians: *moskali*, “Moscowites,” and *katsapy*, “boors.” To counter *Khokhliandia*, the Russian nickname for Ukraine, the Ukrainians call Russia *Katsapshchina*. In response to Russian anti-Semitic slurs, the Russian Jews have offensive nicknames for the Russians, such as “a gentile head” (*goishe kop*), implying “a fool”; “Vanya” (*fonya*, a phonetic variant of the name); “drunkards” (*shikurim*); and “pigs” (*khazeyrim*).

Often accusations and counteraccusations are of the very same nature. If a Russian proverb says that “one Ukrainian is as sly as two Jews,” a Ukrainian one claims that “a Russian is as sly as four Jews” (Roback 218), evidently considering one Jew a unit of slyness. Roback (216–18) lists other Ukrainian proverbs depicting the Russians as bad-mouthed, treacherous, and worse than the devil himself. The most striking in this respect is an international example: a cockroach in Russian vernacular is called *prusak*, “a Prussian,” and in German *Russe*, “a Russian” (Roback 111).

However, in most cases there is no real exchange of hostile humor, for the sides are not on equal footing. Throughout modern history, the Russians have

been “the dominant ethnic element, the source of the certified national culture which the [ruling Soviet and prerevolutionary] elite believed it required” (Armstrong 71).

Thus, a distinction should be made between two kinds of folk laughter directed at other groups: aggressive and defensive laughter. Russian folk humor, with a few exceptions, belongs to the former, described by Hertzler (45–46) as “the laughter of antipathy, antagonism and attack, the laughter directed at or against other individuals or groups, or what they stand for or do or have done, in order to control them, exclude them, reject them, humiliate them, weaken or injure them, punish them.”

The folk laughter of the targeted nationalities aimed at the Russians is defensive laughter, the kind that responds to “the atmosphere of constraint, restraint, taboo; the laughter directed against the social suppressor, the oppressive authorities, the conventions, many features of social institutions, the majorities, the totalitarians, the jailers, the dominators, the ‘superiors’ ” (Hertzler 46).

This humor plays an important role in an ethnicity’s social mechanism. As Hertzler (95) observes,

laughter within the group about some mutually satisfying situation among the members, or laughter directed against disturbing outsiders, is an important factor in enhancing the morale of the members of the in-group and in protecting it against disruptive influences from without. As between groups, when “we” laugh together, it strengthens the boundaries between us and “them” who do not know what we are laughing at, or who are not laughing with us. Furthermore, laughter at foreign groups usually helps to build the esprit de corps of the given group.

Hertzler’s (146) observations about Afro-American humor are fully applicable to Russian Jewish humor; the opposition of “whites” and “blacks” is quite similar to that of “the Jews” and “the Russians.” That is, Jewish humor in Russia is also “a noteworthy instance of laughter as therapeutic agent in a situation of social tension.” It too “has grown out of a condition of enforced subordination and separation, which has created a background of resentment, resistance, and struggle.” The Russian Jew also laughs at the contrast between his status and that of other ethnic groups, “at the contradictions in the contentions and the actions” of the oppressor, at the “impotence” of the other in coming to terms with him.

### | Sociological Functions of Jewish Humor

Russian Jewish humor, as part of the whole phenomenon of East European Jewish humor, is considered by many researchers to be the source of all

modern Jewish folk humor.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is Israeli and American Jewish humor that has interested scholars: relatively little work has been done on contemporary Russian Jewish humor. A number of collections of Russian Jewish jokes have been published in the West, of which David Harris and Israel Rabonovich's (1988) is the most representative, but a great deal remains to be done to analyze fully the wealth of this folkloric material. This situation is even more regrettable because in a country with an enormous censorship apparatus during more than seventy years of Soviet history, the oral folk humor of the Russian Jews became an invaluable source of insight into their hearts and minds. Indeed, in a country where Jewish culture was virtually annihilated on Stalin's orders (Pinkus 138–61), oral humor became the only available form of Jewish self-expression, replacing journals, books, theater, cinema, television programs, and other modern means of communication that were barred to Jews for years. Only with the beginning of *perestroika* did we see some attempts to restore Jewish cultural life. Incalculable harm had already been done.

A small but highly characteristic body of contemporary Russian Jewish jokes is concerned, explicitly and implicitly, with the mass emigration of the Jews from the USSR—the exodus that started in the early 1970s and has continued to the present with great fluctuation in its size and character. These jokes have been much more than a source of entertainment; not only have they served as an accurate gauge of the prevalent mood within the scattered Jewish community, but they have also performed several important social functions. The continuous, collective process of joke telling has always been a means of creating and reinforcing a sense of solidarity and intimacy within the Jewish group. In the absence of any formal organization aimed at representing Jewish interests, oral humor itself took on the functions normally performed by the members of a structured community.

There are two kinds of exodus jokes: those dealing with relationships within the Jewish group (intragroup jokes) and those dealing with relationships between Jews and non-Jews (intergroup jokes). My analysis of the social functions of both types of jokes uses a model suggested by William H. Martineau (114–24). According to this model, social functions of humor are analyzed in three structural settings: (1) those within a specific group; (2) those in an intergroup situation aimed at one of the two groups; and (3) those in an intergroup situation focusing on the interaction and relationship between the two groups.

In Jewish exodus jokes, two of the four major variables of social interaction during the humorous act—that is, the actor (the agent who delivers the joke) and the audience—are taken to be Jewish or pro-Jewish, that is, they include non-Jews sympathetic to the Jewish cause. The third variable, the subject or the butt of the joke, is either the Jews themselves or an agent

outside of the group who creates tension within the Jewish group (by active anti-Semitic behavior or just by demonstrating generally unsympathetic or negligent attitudes toward the Jewish in-group's interests).

The fourth variable, judgment, which is the evaluative element of the whole model, esteems or disparages a particular group. Few problems arise in finding a joke disparaging, due to its nature: it is an act of playful aggression. (Self-disparagement is highly characteristic of Jewish humor in general.) The self-esteem of this group, however, often cannot be identified. Sympathy is a better term to describe the feelings toward the Jews most often evoked in exodus jokes.

### | Early Jokelore on Leaving Russia

Actually, the theme of leaving the Soviet Union appeared in Russian underground humor in the late 1920s, soon after emigration from the USSR was stopped. Despite the number of Jewish protagonists in the "jumping-the-border" jokes of this period, the jokes are not concerned exclusively with the Jews; they express the wish of many people who felt trapped in the country who had more and more been stifled by Stalin's iron hand. Of the three types of jokes of the 1930s that are concerned with the Jews—Jewish jokes that deal with the specifically Jewish condition, anti-Semitic jokes, and Russian jokes in which Jewish characters are employed for artistic purposes—this last type of joke comprised the main body of the jokes about fleeing the country. In them, the Russian storyteller employs a Jewish character in order to emphasize the "no-exit" situation, as if to say that only the shrewd and ingenious folkloric Jew can find the solution to an insoluble problem. In one story, such a character goes abroad on a business trip and sends a series of postcards from the cities in the West that he visits during his trip, until he sends the last one, which comes signed not "Comrade Shapiro," but "free Shapiro." In another story, it is the Jewish character again who is destined to survive under the most perilous circumstances; he "can get out dry from the water," as the Russian saying goes:

- (6.1) Rabinovich almost manages to cross the border, but at the last moment the guards spot him and rush over to him. In a desperate attempt to save his life, Rabinovich notices a pile of dog excrement, pulls down his pants, and squats over it.  
"What are you doing here?" the guards shout at him.  
"Don't you see, an emergency stomach problem."  
The guards look at the stool and ask, "How come this turd is a dog's?"  
Says the Jew: "And what kind of life is this, anyway?"

“A dog’s life” is the term that the storyteller found fit to describe the life not only of a Jew but of a great many Soviet citizens in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> It was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s that jokes expressing the wish to leave the country gained a genuinely Jewish coloring.

### | Jewish Jokelore of Postwar Russia

This development was preceded by Stalin’s growing anti-Semitism in postwar Russia. Stalin’s campaigns against cosmopolitanism and Zionism in the late 1940s and early 1950s were crowned by one of the most horrifying atrocities of this century, the cold-blooded murder of Jewish poets, writers, actors, and other representatives of Jewish culture in the late 1940s, and by the infamous “doctors’ case”—against “the assassins in white robes”—in the early 1950s. Jewish theater, Jewish publications, and Jewish schools virtually ceased to exist. Soon it was implied that Jews were responsible for all of the troubles of postwar Russia.

To isolate Soviet citizens from the rest of the world, the Soviet government discouraged contacts with foreigners. Soviet citizens feared writing to relatives abroad lest they be accused of giving out state secrets, a common charge in the late 1930s, still fresh in the minds of many people, both Jews and non-Jews. It was especially dangerous, however, to correspond with Jewish relatives in America and Israel. Under the pretext of the struggle with world Zionism and cosmopolitanism, Jews were forced to cut off their ties with relatives living abroad, for fear of being accused as accomplices in world Zionist intrigues. Sometimes even parents and children stopped corresponding.

In the 1960s, when the Soviet government turned to the West for subsidies, it was charged with isolating its citizens from the world. It was then that the following joke with a highly ironic punch line was created and gained instant popularity among Russian Jews:

(6.2) A Jew was summoned to KGB headquarters.

“You, Comrade Rabinovich, cause us a great deal of embarrassment. Those friends of yours in the West make ridiculous claims that we prevent you from writing to your relatives abroad. You are perfectly aware that this is a lie. When did you last write to your brother in Israel? Shame on you! No more excuses! Take this piece of paper and a pen, and write your brother right now!”

The Jew took the paper and the pen, looked uncomfortably at the KGB officer, and began to write:

“Dear brother! Finally, I’ve found the time and the place to write you a letter. . . .”

Jewish jokes of the late 1940s and early 1950s address the central issue of Jewish life of that period. Stalin's anti-Semitism, well documented and known to the whole world now, rekindled dormant anti-Jewish sentiments among the Russians. Having suffered tremendous losses during World War II, they needed to find a scapegoat responsible for life's continuing misery. Among drunks on city streets one could hear again the old slogan of the infamous Black Hundred, an anti-Semitic military group responsible for organizing Jewish pogroms at the beginning of the century: "Smash the Jews, and save Russia!" Jews were thought deserving of their own misery for the sheer fact of their existence, as the following joke demonstrates:

(6.3) An anti-Semite and a Jew were strolling along the street. A brick fell from a roof and hit the Jew on the head.

"Look how overpopulated we are with the damned Jews," the anti-Semite said, spitting on the ground.

"A poor brick doesn't even have a free place to fall."<sup>3</sup>

Shortly before his death in March of 1953, Stalin contemplated an overnight mass deportation of Jews to Siberia (Pinkus 145).<sup>4</sup> According to Jewish folk humor, this man, who considered himself a great internationalist and a father to all nations, claimed that the planned action was only to benefit the ancient people: the mass resettlement in areas of cold climate was supposed to produce a new breed of Jewish people in years to come—the frost-proof Jews. They would then have no fear of living anywhere on earth, the joke's Stalin explained, including the North Pole.

There is no reason to believe that Stalin wouldn't have succeeded in this plan, as in so many other of his grand undertakings. It was only his death that prevented another Holocaust, now on Russian soil. Soon after the funeral of the "father of all nations," this joke appeared:

(6.4) A little Jewish man knocked on the gates of the Kremlin:

"May I see Comrade Stalin?" he said to the guard.

"Comrade Stalin's dead. Haven't you heard?"

"Thank you," said the Jew and left, only to come back in a moment.

"I'd like to talk to Comrade Stalin," he told the guard again.

"Are you crazy?" said the guard. "Stalin's dead."

"Thank you, thank you," said the man, leaving.

But he soon returned: "Just one short word to Comrade Stalin. Please!"

"Get out of here! I'll arrest you as a stupid nuisance! I've told you ten times: Comrade Stalin's dead, dead, dead!"

"Oh, thank you so much. I just can't hear enough of it."<sup>5</sup>

Stalin's anti-Semitic legacy was not forgotten, however, and the Jews' troubles did not end with his death. The struggle to survive in the anti-Semitic atmosphere of postwar Russia took many forms. To escape their bitter lot, Russian Jews continued to hide their national identity, a task nearly impossible because of the carefully designed system under which no Soviet citizen could conceal his or her nationality. In all official documents—birth certificates, passports, job applications, and so on—after the first four items dealing with one's last, first, and patronymic names and date of birth, there was (and just recently [in 1997] eliminated) that “fifth item”—the question of one's nationality. It became clear to many people (not only to the Jews) that now the only function of this category was to identify Jews. This is why the punch line of the following joke, which might be incomprehensible to an outsider, left absolutely no doubt of its meaning for anyone living in postwar Russia:

(6.5) A Jew fills out one of the official applications:

“Have you been a member of any party other than the Communist Party?”

“No.”

“Have you remained on any territory occupied by the enemy?”

“No.”

“Have you been convicted or are you currently under investigation for any criminal activity?”

“No.”

“Your nationality?”

“Yes!”

It was also clear to the listener to the following joke which nationality was implied in a parody of a newspaper ad:

(6.6) “Will exchange one nationality for two convictions. Could be long-term.”

Thus, as the joke makes clear, to be a Jew in Russia then was much worse than to be a convicted criminal. Being a Jew was a kind of punishment. In fact, some jokes directly expressed this:

(6.7) They proposed a new penalty for traffic violators. For the first offense, the offender gets a hole punched in his driver's license. For the second violation, he gets another. After the third offense, the fifth item in his passport is to be changed to “a Jew.”  
(Shturman and Tiktin 496)

There were, however, other ways to identify a Jew without looking into a passport. A person's name—first name, patronymic, and surname—also could reveal a Jew.<sup>6</sup> Anti-Semitism often ran so high that any last name with

a European flavor was suspected of being Jewish.<sup>7</sup> This Russian paranoia is mocked in the following quip, undoubtedly of Jewish origin, which involves a folk hero of contemporary Russian jokelore, Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev, an unsophisticated fellow, a hero of the Civil War much celebrated by Soviet propaganda. His orderly, Pet'ka, tells him:

(6.8) “You know, Vassily Ivanovich, the Gulf Stream [in Russian one word: *Gol'fstrim*] has frozen.”

“How many times have I told you, Pet'ka, don't send those Jews on scouts' missions. They are not cut out for it.” (Telesin 491)

### | Anti-Discrimination Jokes

Discrimination against the Jews had an overwhelming effect on every step they took. The Jews' traditional concern for their children's education came into conflict with the practice of accepting as few Jewish students into universities as possible, no matter how brilliant the applicant might be. It was especially difficult to receive an education in the humanities, since this sphere was zealously guarded by the party in order to protect it from any ideologically unreliable elements—in practical terms, primarily Jews:

(6.9) At the entrance exam in a prestigious institute they try to disqualify a Jewish boy. They decide to ask him a question that no one could answer:

“Can you explain how Leo Tolstoy remembered himself from the age of forty days?”

“So what!” the student says. “I remember myself from the time I was seven days old.”

“So, tell us what you remember.”

“I remember how an old Jew with a long gray beard came to our apartment, washed his hands, took a blade in his hand, and cut off my chances of being admitted to your university.”<sup>8</sup>

Especially numerous were Jewish jokes dealing with job discrimination. Some were rather straightforward, others a bit more subtle. Hiring practices that had nothing to do with ability, but everything to do with nationality, were mocked in the following jokes. The situation—a Jew trying to get a job—was so frequent in Jewish humor until the end of the Soviet regime that the jokes consist only of their punch lines:

(6.10) A chief of personnel looks attentively at a Jew in front of him:

“I'm sorry, but your profile doesn't suit us.”

(Here the word “profile” has a double meaning—a facial silhouette and the applicant's area of expertise.)