

# Soviet dissident on campus

by Ken Daskewech

*"Freedom is the consciousness that you have human rights, that you are protected from abuse and violence. In the Soviet regime you have no rights. You stand entirely powerless against an all powerful state."*

After serving nine years of a fifteen-year sentence for the attempted theft of a Soviet airplane in 1970, Edward Kuznetsov and a co-conspirator were freed in exchange for two Soviet citizens convicted of spying on the U.S.

Kuznetsov received his first prison sentence for his participation in a democratic rights movement while still a student at the University of Moscow. For his role in a poetry reading and political forum, Kuznetsov received seven years of hard labour.

During a later prison term, Kuznetsov compiled a diary dealing with prison life and his increasing commitment to his Jewishness. The *Prison Diaries*, already published in the West, is to be followed by a second book about the Soviet Gulags.

Kuznetsov now lives in Israel, where he is pursuing a career as an author and continuing to work to publicize conditions of Soviet political prisoners.

disagrees, he says;

"The oppression in my country is so ugly that it even creates an ugliness in its opponents. The opposition has to work in conditions that are so abnormal that they are forced to become extremists. And if these people came out on top it is doubtful if the result would be better than what we have today."

When he was two, Kuznetsov's father died and he was reared by his non-Jewish mother (Kuznetsov is his mother's maiden name). Kuznetsov credits a wave of student unrest with saving him from becoming one of the "model Soviet citizens" he has come to despise. Similarly, he admits that it was prison which shaped his future by exposing him to anti-Semitism and needless brutality.

In his diaries he writes; "He knew that he had been condemned for nothing, for a child's game, for a twenty year old's romantic whim, for an impulse of the heart."

A burning desire to revitalize that part of him which was Jewish led Kuznetsov to reject his country and plan the hijacking of a plane in 1970. However, all were arrested before they managed to reach the aircraft. Kuznetsov was sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment, a fact he attributes to international pressure brought to bear on his case.



Soviet Union is much more systematic in its attempts at defusing political movements than anything experienced by North Americans, he explained.

Mixing pointed analysis with humorous analogy and numerous quips at Russian authorities, the author emphasized the role of the Soviet economy in shaping both domestic and international strategies.

"The Soviet system . . . allows everyone to work but only at the expense of high levels of productivity," Kuznetsov said. For example, he said, a third of the Soviet population find its employment in the production and processing of agricultural goods, compared to a much smaller figure of 5 per cent in the United States.

Kuznetsov compares the official claim that unemployment has been wiped out in the Soviet Union in the 1930s to assertions made by Hitler and the Nazis about the eradication of unemployment in Germany before and during the last world war.

Domestically, he sees the situation as one of a never-ending 'slow-down' strike. Low wages earned by the average worker are quickly spent on securing the necessities of daily life. The claim that "no visible unemployment exists in the USSR," is made entirely at the expense of the Russian worker for whom any "right" to work has been replaced by a "responsibility" to do so.

Repression has also been integrated into the Soviet system for economic reasons, Kuznetsov said. The prison camps provide certain economic dividends to the government which it desperately needs. "The camp system has become part of the economy; slave labour is economically viable," he observed.

Responding to a question from the audience dealing with the current status of various nationalities within the Soviet Union, Kuznetsov replied, "Officially the problem is solved. Actually it remains acute, involving complex political issues, and not simply a variety

of demands for cultural freedoms.

"Moscow has always granted token rights to ethnic groups of smaller size, who pose less of a threat to government. However, larger minorities, such as the Ukrainians and Jews, suffer more and receive little encouragement to pursue cultural freedoms."

The possibility of a return to the Cold War has increased Kuznetsov's determination to publicize the violation of human rights in the USSR, and to re-evaluate the foundations of detente.

He is quick to admit that his release and subsequent swap, along with four other dissidents last April, came at possibly the height of detente. With the SALT treaty being discussed before the US Congress and Russia vying for Most Favored Nation trading status with the Americans, Jewish emigration from the USSR was at an all-time high and the dissident trade was part of a showing of good faith on behalf of Moscow. Since then, Senate opposition to SALT has flared with the situation in Afghanistan, and the question of reduced tariffs tabled, possible permanently.

"There has been tremendous changes in the Russian internal condition in the last few years. The Soviets thought twice about arresting anyone; they paused to consider the Western reaction," he said Wednesday. While the complexity of the present international scene leaves little room for hope, Kuznetsov is sure that pressure by the West would yield a positive response from the Kremlin.

Just after his release from prison, Kuznetsov told an English reporter;

"After all, not everything is wrong with this regime. There are very many Russians who see nothing to object to in the conditions and ideas by which they live. There doesn't have to be a change of regime. The wolf must be made to drop the lamb from time to time. But the wolf will remain the wolf, and there is no question of winning him out. That would disturb the balance of nature. The wolf has a right to live."



Kuznetsov (left) hasn't faded despite 14 years in Soviet prisons.

Edward Kuznetsov has become acutely aware of the ideological differences separating Soviet dissidents today. But more important, he feels, is that the commitment to fellow dissidents remaining jailed in the Soviet Union be kept. The choice is to either act or allow the brutality of the camps to take their toll.

Unlike Solzhenitsyn or Aleksander Ginzburg, Kuznetsov has no desire to return to his native country and he rejects Solzhenitsyn's conception of Western society as "suffering from spiritual exhaustion" and the "langour of excessive mediocrity." To a large extent, Kuznetsov says the Soviet system and its citizenry are suited to one another, and he expresses doubt at the thought of disturbing the relationship in too drastic a fashion.

A small, sturdy man, dressed in a conservative grey suit, Kuznetsov spoke through an interpreter Wednesday night at the U of A, answering questions with a mixture of thoughtful sincerity and cutting humor.

"As for the West, I have a better opinion of it now than before I came; there is a greater understanding and insight into Soviet conditions here than I believed possible. Of course, I have so far met only people who are well-disposed. I would like to think that they

are representative of the whole West, because what is amazing is to be at last among people who act from altruistic motives."

The pessimism contained in Kuznetsov's prison diaries remains largely intact, albeit somewhat diluted. Of his comrade dissidents with whom he

For a man who has spent 16 of his 40 years behind prison walls, Kuznetsov remains optimistic about the possibility of advances in civil rights in the Soviet Union. Allowing that the next two generations may see changes implemented, Kuznetsov is wary of the threats posed by the situation in Afghanistan and the upcoming Moscow Olympics. The Soviet regime will attempt to isolate dissidents from Western visitors to the Games, he said, citing recent crackdowns on Estonian activists as an example.

Speaking of the existence of repressive regimes in other countries tries, Kuznetsov stressed that none attempt to glamorize or propagandize themselves as much as the Soviets do. Much of what is labelled oppression in the West is mere imperfection in the economic systems of industrialized nations, he said. While those who are discriminated against in North America are struggling for their legitimate and recognized rights, oppression in the

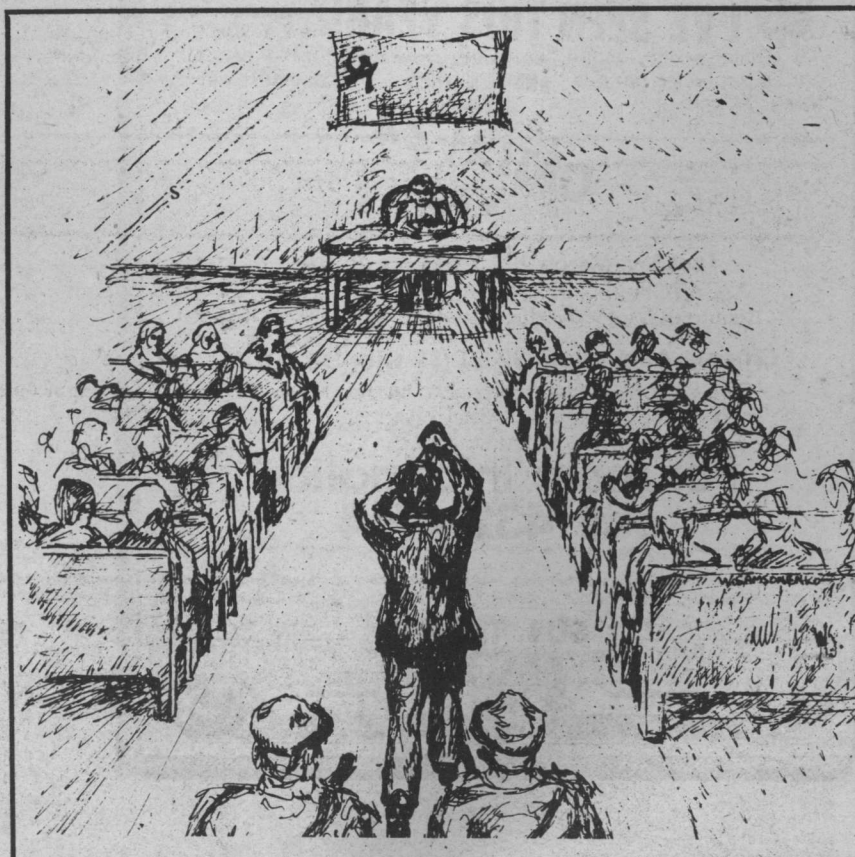


Photo Rick Lawrence