

Earl Raab
August 24, 1976

The Ordeal of Yuri Vudka

A couple of weeks ago, the San Francisco JCRC received a phone call saying that Yuri Vudka had been released. But not quite.

Everyone should know about Yuri Vudka. In the late 1960's he was a student at the University of Ryazan, 125 miles south of Moscow, along with his brother and Shimon Grilius. Having become intensely interested in Jewish affairs, they gathered and studied Hebrew textbooks and encyclopedias, and tape recordings of such books as Leon Uris's Exodus. Yuri wrote a memorandum proposing emigration rather than assimilation for Russian Jews. And all three applied for emigration.

Shortly thereafter, in August 1969, they were arrested. Their Jewish books were confiscated, along with recordings of Jewish songs and a painting of a Jew. On the basis of this evidence, they were charged with violations of Articles 70 and 72 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Republic.

Article 70 of the Russian Criminal Code outlaws "agitation or propaganda carried on for the purpose of subverting or weakening the Soviet regime or of committing especially dangerous crimes against the state; or the circulation, for the same purpose, of slanderous fabrications which defame the Soviet state or social system."

Article 72 outlaws "organizational activity directed to the preparation or commission of especially dangerous crimes against the state."

These "dangerous crimes" were outlined during the "trial": the possession of various books about Jews and Judaism; and the conspiracy to study Jewish subjects. The prosecutor, a man named Dubstov, waved a copy of Bertrand Russel's book on Soviet anti-Semitism, and charged the defendants with the crime of reading those two anti-Soviet scoundrels, "Bertrok and Rossel." They were convicted of course: Yuri Vudka for seven years, the others for shorter terms.

Is it any wonder that Jewish organizations have a special sensitivity to such matters as due process and free speech. Can you imagine an American law which would make it a crime to utter "slanderous fabrications which defame the United States or its social system?"

Not that some vigilance isn't required. American high school seniors were recently asked whether anyone should be allowed to say on television that "Russia is better than America." Almost half said "No." That is one reason why the JCRC is now spearheading an effort to beef up high school programs on the Bill of Rights.

But in Yuri Vudka's case, there was not even any evidence offered in court to show that the confiscated literature was anti-Soviet in character. When various defendants tried to point out that the literature was not anti-Soviet, the trial judges interrupted them and tried to prevent them from speaking. This is documented by Telford Taylor, prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, in a book entitled Courts of Terror, published by Knopf.

It was not only in the courts but in the prison camps that Yuri Vudka had special problems as a Jew. Like other Jewish prisoners, he was forcibly shaved, prevented from wearing a yarmulka, or from having prayerbooks or other Jewish books. In January, 1973, a procurator named Miakishev explained that the Declaration of Human Rights was not intended for Jews. Vudka spent much time in special cells, punitive work assignments and solitary confinement because he kept insisting that the Jews should have the same rights as others.

So the JCRC was pleased to receive that phone call saying that Vudka was released after being imprisoned for a little less than seven years. But there are indications that, even after this long ordeal, he will not be allowed to leave the Soviet Union to join his wife and family in Israel.

The next stage is for Soviet authorities to find out whether anyone remembers Yuri Vudka; if not, he will stay where he is.

Perhaps you and your friends would like to pick up the phone and call Soviet Consul-General Alexander Zinchuk, as others have done. You can assure him that in San Francisco we remember Yuri Vudka--and wouldn't it be nice if, at long last, he were allowed to leave?