## Smirnoff 'jokes' way into successful career

"My name is Yakov Smirnoff. I am originally from the Soviet Un-

"Any name is Hood Smirnol," and originally from the Soviet Union.

"Thank pou wery much. I'm an American now."
Loud applause.
"It feels pretty good to be an American. I remember the day I arrived. I had read a lot of books and they all said the first thing you see when you come to America is the Statue of Liberty. Well, the people who wrote those books came by boat. I flew into Kennedy Airport. The first thing I see is a 400-pound woman in the immigration office. I look up and say, Statue of Liberty!" She answers, No. but I'm tired and poor."
When Yakov Smirnolf emigrated from his Communist bomeland a docade ago, by, too, was tired and pook to the communist homeland a control of the community has been a control of the community has a

The story:

Played a leading role in a syndicated television show, "What a Country," on the Fox Broadcasting Network.

Network.

• Guest-starred as a Russian selling stolen watches on "Night Court."

• Performed his comedy routine across America in casinos, comedy clubs and on "The Tonight Show,"

• Appeared in such movies as "Moscow on the Hudson," "Hearthurn, "The Money Pit" and "Brewster's Millions."

• Wrote a book, "America on Six Rubbes a Day," published by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, in November 1987.

EVEN BEFORE "glasnost" be-came a household word, Smirnoff was sweeping the country off its feet with his wit and humor. The Wall Street Journal dubbed him "Ameri-ca's first comedian from the real Borscht Belt" and the Los Angeles Times wrote, "The comrade knows

unny!" His Soviet schtick is as refreshing as a heat wave in Siberia, Smirnoff recently gave Detroiters a taste of his home brew as part of the "Let Us Entertain You" series at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloom-

"In my high school yearbook I was ted most likely to be an Ameri-

'In my high school yearbook, I was voted most likely to be an American.

- Yakov Smirnoff

Smirnoff, a 37-year-old bachelor, grew up in the port city of Odessa, which he described as "a little more free-minded than other parts of Rus-

sia"

As the class clown, he performed for his peers during school talent shows. He recalled playing such playground games as "Simon Demands," "Dodge Bombs" and — his favorite — "lide and Stay Hidden."

"It's hard to be funny in Russian schools," he confessed. "You shoot spik balls at the teacher and she shoofs heek."

spit bans shoots back

"(Education) is free. But you get

way."
When he turned 18, Smirnoff joined the army and entertained troops all over country as the Bob Hope of Russia.
"The army ways't had" he said.

Hope of Russia.
"The army want' bad," he said.
"We lived in solar-heated barracks.
They had no roofs. We'd sit around
singing songs like 'Siaying Alive' and
Please Release Me, Let Me Go."
After two years of mandatory service, he toured with Soviet rock
bands like "The Rolling Tanks" (just
kiddine).

bands like "The Rolling lanks" Qust kidding).
Smitmoff had learned how to be a refrigeration mechanic in high school and he earned a college de-gree in art education. But he aban-doned routine nine-to-five work to pursue show "biz."

LANDING a job on the sea gave him his first big break. While enter-taining on cruise ships to the Black Sea ("The Love Bargo," he calls it), Smirnoff discovered the benefits of

Smirroff discovered the benefits of capitalism. "One day, I asked for a raise and for my parents to go on the cruise with me," he recalled. "They yelled at me and kicked me out. But the sent a telegram the same day and apologized.
"American and European companies contracted with the Soviet government to use those ships and they wanted good chefs and good entersainment. All of a sudden, I got a taste of capitalism and I liked it."

It took two years for the Soviet government to grant a visa to Smirnoff and his parents.
"I applied for a visa and they gave me Mastercard," he wisecracked.
"The KGB (which stands for Kiss Goodbye Your Butt) decides who they want to let out. They investigate you, lire you from work and turn people against you. It's like '60 Minutes."
From 1077.70 Cm.

turn peopie against you. Its like of Minutes."
From 1977-79, Smirnoff stayed in New York City, taking odd jobs as a bartender, bus boy and shipping amanger for a company that made greeting beils.
Learning English wasn't easy. "I didn't speak the language when I got here so I locked myself in a room and watched television for three months. Then I realized it was a Spanish station."

LIKE THE character in "Moscow on the Hudson," he relied on the kindness of other immigrants who gave his family food, china and furniture. "Our apartment building in Washington Heights was just like a big (ethnic) family, a melting pot of Germans, "Czechoslovakians and Russians."

Chasing his dream, he moved to California and sold light bulbs and newspapers, while performing at the Comedy Store.

Canada and the performing at the ways for.

Thanks to Robin Williams, he met director Paul Mazursky and landed a bit part in "Moscow on the Hudson." (He was a dishwasher in the Russian restaurant where Williams worked as a busboy.)

The gap between performing comedy in the United States and in the Soviet Union is wider than the Persain Guil, he contends.

"In Russia, my material was censered once a year by the Department of Jokes. They'd send it back to me and I'd have to stay with the script for a year. I couldn't improvise. If someone hecked me from the audience, 1d have to say, 'come back in the Williams."

ence, I'd have to say, 'come back in a year.' "
Winners of the best political Joke contest in Russia get 20 years, he deadpanned. Here's one he reportedly told: "There's a rule in Russia. If they ask you, 'Who's your father?' you're supposed to answer 'My father is the So-tiet Union. If they ask, 'Mho's your mother?' you say 'The Communist party.' When they asked me 'Who do you want to be?' I said, 'I want to be an orphan.' And, they sent me to winter camp in Siberia. "Since glasnost, they say we have freedom of speech in Russia. But here, you also have freedom after you speak."



Russian emigrant Yakov Smirnolf has parlayed his brand of

## Smirnoff: A closer look at Reagan, Gorbachev

More sips of Smirnoff: GORBACHEV

"The man is very slick. He said he was going to pull all the troops out of Afghanistan and put them back where they belong — Poland, Czechowskie

"How can you trust a man who has a birth mark on his head the shape of Poland? Every time they invade an-

other country, it grows."

"Reagan says he doesn't know anything about Iran-Contra and doc-tors keep cutting off pleces of his nose." REAGAN

FREEDOM
"I saw this box in a store that says

'I though to myself, 'What a country!' '

New Freedom and I said to myself, "What a Country." Freedom in a box. I bought 15 of them, super maxi. I figured I should get as much free-dom as possible. I'd write letters to my friends in Russia and put those things in envelopes. I thought they should enjoy some freedom, too."

SUPERMARKETS
"Do they have supermarkets in Russia? Yeah, they have signs that say 'sorry, we're open."
"When I came to America and saw the amount of food here, it was incredible. I saw powdered milk, you just add water and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice, you just add water and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder. I thought to myself, 'What a country! I'm making my family to-

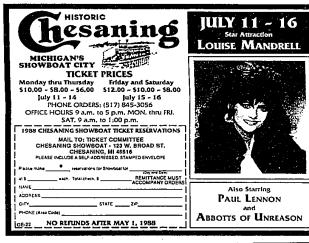
country! I'm making my family to

SUPERMARKETS

- Yakov Smirnoff

RUSSIAN WOMEN
"Russian men have a saying.
"Women are iike buses . . . 'That's li.
"When you go to a Russian singles bar, you get locky, If you go home alone. Typical pickup lines are: "Can I buy you a potato?" or "Would you like to defect?"

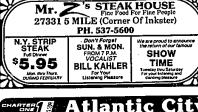
GOING BACK
"I called the Russian Embassy a
white ago and said I would like to go
back for a visit. They said 'it would
cost me an arm and a leg.' I know
those guys. I said, 'I'll wait for a
sale.'"















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