How a short, burly thug became a tall, dapper Chubby Checker fan.

THE ANDROPOV FILE

BY EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN

WHEN Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov was merely head of the K.G.B., his image was that of the stereotypic hard-line "police boss." His major accomplishment, according to C. L. Sulzberger, writing in *The New York Times* in 1974, was "a fairly successful campaign to throttle the recent wave of liberal dissidence." Nor was he viewed as much of an admirer of foreign culture. In 1980 Harrison E. Salisbury wrote in the *Times* that Andropov "has been working for three years on schemes to minimize the mingling of foreigners and natives. . . . Now Andropov's hands have been freed to embark on all kinds of repressive measures designed to enhance the 'purity' of Soviet society." Completing this picture of a tough, xenophobic, wave-throttling cop, Andropov was physically described, in another *Times* story, as a "shock-haired, burly man."

Andropov's accession to power last November was accompanied by a corresponding ennoblement of his image. Suddenly he became, in *The Wall Street Journal*, "silver-haired and dapper." His stature, previously reported in *The Washington Post* as an unimpressive "five feet, eight inches," was abruptly elevated to "tall and urbane." The *Times* noted that Andropov "stood conspicuously taller than most" Soviet leaders and that "his spectacles, intense gaze and donnish demeanor gave him the air of a scholar." *U.S. News & World Report*, on the other hand, reported that "he has notoriously bad eyesight and wears thick spectacles."

His linguistic abilities also came in for scrutiny. Harrison Salisbury wrote, "The first thing to know about Mr. Andropov is that he speaks and reads English." Another *Times* story took note of his "fluent English." *Newsweek* reported that even though he had never met a "senior" American official, "he spoke English and relaxed with American novels." Confirmation of his command of English appeared in *Time*, *The Wall Street Journal*; *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Washington Post*. *The Economist* credited him with "a working knowledge of German," and *U.S. News & World Report* added Hungarian to the growing list. And this quadralingual prodigy was skilled in the use of language, too: *Time* described him as reportedly "a witty conversationalist," and "a bibliophile" and "connoisseur of modern art" to boot. *The Washington Post* passed along a rumor that he was partly Jewish. (Andropov was rapidly becoming That Cosmopolitan Man.)

Soon there were reports that Andropov was a man of extraordinary accomplishment, with some interests and proclivities that are unusual in a former head of the K.G.B. According to an article in *The Washington Post*, Andropov "is fond of cynical political jokes with an anti-regime twist. . . . collects abstract art, likes jazz and Gypsy music," and "has a record of stepping out of his high party official's cocoon to contact dissidents." Also, he swims, "plays tennis," and wears clothes that are "sharply tailored in a West European style." Besides the Viennese waltz and the Hungarian czarda, he "dances the tango gracefully." (At a press conference within hours of Andropov's accession, President Reagan, asked about the prospects for agreement with him, used the unfortunate metaphor, "It takes two to tango.") *The Wall Street Journal* added that Andropov "likes Glenn Miller records, good scotch whisky, Oriental rugs, and American books." To the list of his musical favorites, *Time* added "Chubby Checker, Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, and Bob Eberly," and, asserting that he had once worked as a Volga boatman, said that he enjoyed singing "hearty renditions of Russian songs" at after-theater parties. *The Christian Science Monitor* suggested that he has "tried his hand at writing verse—in Russian, as it happens, and of a comic variety."

The press was less successful in ferreting out more mundane details of his life. Where, for example, was he born? *The Washington Post* initially reported that he was "a native of Karelia," a Soviet province on the Finnish border. *The New York Times* gave his birthplace as the "southern Ukraine," which is hundreds of miles to the south. And *Time* said he had been born in "the village of Nagutskoye in the northern Caucasus." His birthplace was thus narrowed down to an area stretching from Finland to Iran. There was also some vagueness with respect to his education. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that he had "graduated" from an unnamed "technical college," but *U.S. News & World Report* had him "drop out" of Petrozavodsk University, while *Newsweek* awarded him a diploma from the Rybinsk Water Transportation Technicum, a vocational school

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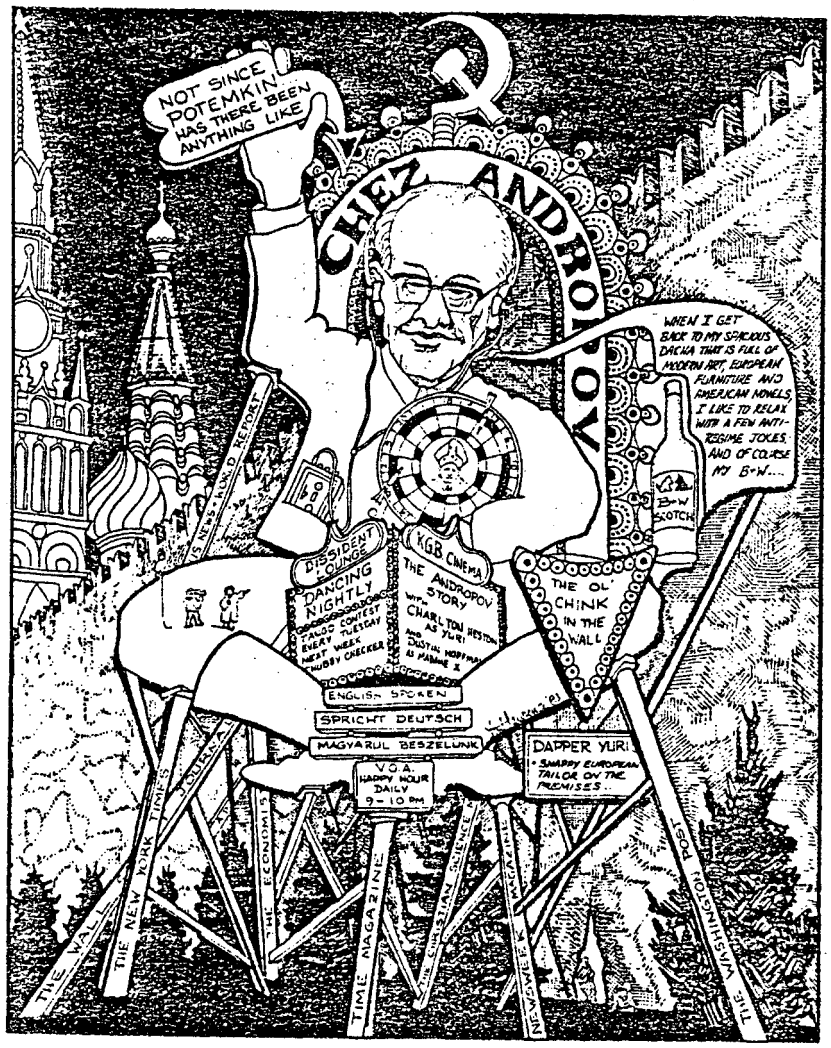
that teaches river navigation. Where had he learned music, art, poetry, Hungarian, German—and English? Harrison Salisbury suggested that he picked up English as a "young man," but *The Christian Science Monitor* contended that he learned it from a tutor, whom he saw three times a week when he was well into his 40s. The balance of his biography consists almost entirely of official announcements of awards, promotions, and trips as part of official Soviet delegations. *Time* reported him to be a widower. There is no mention, however, of whom or when he married, or whether his wife had shared his interest in jazz, American novels, scotch, telling anti-regime jokes, dancing Viennese waltzes, and visiting liberal dissidents.

The press does, however, furnish a vivid description of his home life at 26 Kutuzov Prospekt—where, according to Hedrick Smith's book, *The Russians*, Brezhnev himself resided. The scene there seems to have been quite lively, a combination of salon and recital hall. According to *The Washington Post*, Yuri Andropov is "a perfect host." On some occasions, he would invite "leading dissidents to his home for well-lubricated discussions that sometimes extended to the wee hours of the morning," after which he would send his guests home in his own chauffeured car. Alternatively, according to Harrison Salisbury in the *Times*, he invites foreign visitors to his country home. Salisbury writes, "A casual visitor to his country house . . . found him listening to an English-language Voice of America broadcast. . . . It was a long-standing habit." Andropov assiduously reads American books, including, Salisbury notes with quiet pride, his own novel, *The Gates of Hell*. Andropov's library, according to an earlier *Times* story, also included *Valley of the Dolls*, by Jacqueline Susann, and *How Green Was My Valley*, by Richard Llewellyn. Moreover, according to Salisbury, Andropov regularly invited dissident musicians to his apartment for "private recitals." His record collection included the "Glenn Miller Orchestra and other American bands," and his bar, "scotch and French cognac." *Time* described his apartment, with the precision of a classified ad, as "5½ rooms," with such "outstanding features" as "a stereo system" (for jazz), a "sofa" (for dissidents), and "a cabinet of highly polished wood" (for eyes only). These items, wrote *Time*, were "gifts to Andropov from the late Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito." *The Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, reported just as authoritatively that Andropov's home "was furnished with Hungarian furniture, the gift of Janos Kadar, Hungary's Moscow-backed leader, as an apparent gesture of appreciation for Mr. Andropov's role in suppressing the Hungarian Revolution."



DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

The varied descriptions of Andropov's apartment and his Renaissance style of life come principally from a single source. His name is Vladimir Sakharov, and he is fully credited by *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, and others for the descriptions of Andropov's taste in American jazz and novels, his preference for imported liquor and furniture, and his "strange attraction for Western culture." (Sakharov, who is usually described as a "K.G.B. defector," is not related to Andrei Sakharov, the physicist and human rights activist.) There is, however, some question about the provenance of Vladimir Sakharov as a source. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* not only identified him as a "former K.G.B. agent," but also said he had defected "this year" (1982) and stipulated that Andropov was "his former boss." One might reasonably conclude from this that Sakharov had until recently been working in the K.G.B.'s office in Moscow, and that he had defected with important

information about Andropov. In fact, Sakharov did not defect in 1982. He defected eleven years earlier, on July 11, 1971. Sakharov was never actually in the K.G.B., though he does recount two efforts to recruit him; at the time of his defection, he was a 26-year-old diplomat in the Foreign Ministry. And in his own two lengthy accounts of his experiences, he never claimed to know Yuri Andropov.

The first such account appeared in John Barron's *KGB: The Secret Work of Soviet Secret Agents*, published by the Reader's Digest Press in 1974. Sakharov had been put in touch with Barron on February 1, 1972. Barron writes that in 1964, when Sakharov was 19 years old and a schoolmate of Andropov's son Igor, he attended a "sexual orgy" at the Andropov apartment, where he "wound up sleeping with a girl in the bed of the man who now heads the K.G.B." Barron now says that he still considers Sakharov's description of the apartment to be "credible," although Sakharov, at the time of his interviews with Barron, "appeared to have a minor drinking problem." It is from this single, seminal visit that the descriptions of Andropov's apartment appear to have sprouted and flourished in the press. Three years ago, Sakharov wrote his own autobiography, *High Treason*, published by Putnam, in which he fails to mention either the "sexual orgy" or any other visit to the Andropov apartment. But he does provide an illuminating, if eerily reminiscent, description of his own home life.

ECHOING his version of Andropov's apartment, Sakharov writes that he himself lived in a "spacious" apartment with furniture from Eastern Europe, a TV, and a piano. He writes: "We always had a high-quality record player and plenty of American popular music recordings . . . with a leaning to jazz stylists, including records by Benny Goodman, Perry Como, and Frank Sinatra." He personally amassed a collection of jazz and "swing music" that included Glenn Miller, Dave Brubeck, Erroll Garner, Charlie Parker, and Duke Ellington. When not listening to records on his stereo, he often "poured a glass of Black & White," "turned on [his] Grundig solid state," and "turned it to the Voice of America." He "religiously" listened to jazz. When he went to the homes of his teenage friends, he writes, "I always took recordings to parties—and usually I'd supply scotch or bourbon or rye as well." (If so, he may well have supplied the jazz records and scotch he later reported he saw in Andropov's home.) He also recalls carrying around with him a copy of *How Green Was My Valley*—one of the books that, years later, he told the *Times* he had seen on Andropov's shelf. (The other book he told the *Times* he saw in Andropov's home in 1964, Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, was not published until 1966—an interesting anachronism.)

Sakharov recounts that while still a teenager in Moscow he was approached by a man from the C.I.A., named "George," who eventually succeeded in recruiting him as a C.I.A. agent in Yemen in 1967. In 1968 he was offered a position in the K.G.B., but he was apprehensive that this would interfere with his work for the C.I.A., and he had his father, an influential diplomatic courier, intervene. His K.G.B. application was then squelched. Later that year Sakharov went off to Egypt as a junior diplomat. It was in Cairo that he defected. More than ten years later, he re-emerged in Los Angeles as an expert on Andropov—but his expertise was based, according to his own accounts, on little more than a teenage reverie.

THE SOURCES for other Andropov details turn out to be similarly elusive. For example, the remarkable account of a fully "Westernized" Andropov sending his car to fetch dissidents to his home appeared originally in *The Washington Post*'s Sunday "Outlook" section on May 30, 1982. The author, Charles Fenyvesi, explained to me that he had heard the story secondhand from émigrés in Washington, and that he was told that the person who had been entertained by Andropov was a former Russian dissident now living in Israel. Fenyvesi, under deadline pressure, was able to reach the source in Israel only at the last minute, and the source then said that he had never met Andropov in his life and that his contact had been with another K.G.B. officer. Confronted with the problem of having his source disclaim the story, Fenyvesi let the original account stand, adding that the witness "now denies having met with Andropov."

Harrison Salisbury's account of a visit to Andropov had so many fly-on-the-wall details about his dacha life that even an editor at the *Times* presumed it was based on firsthand experience. Later, Salisbury told me that his source was a "non-Soviet foreign visitor," and declined to identify him further. (By publishing his story, though, Salisbury has probably identified his source to Andropov and the K.G.B., who presumably keep records of foreign visitors to the dacha; it is only *Times* readers who are kept in the dark.) Whoever the mystery visitor was, his description of Andropov's voracious appetite for American novels, American newsmagazines, and English-language broadcasts on the Voice of America presupposes that Andropov has some fluency in English. Salisbury asserts that "Mr. Andropov is the first Russian leader since Czar Nicholas II who is comfortable in the English tongue" (which omits Lenin, who spoke both English and German).

Yet despite such flat assertions, Andropov's grasp of English turns out to be questionable. No Western journalist has yet interviewed him. Malcolm Toon, the former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, who has spoken with Andropov several times, did so in Russian, not English. Ambassador Toon says he strongly doubts that Andropov has any noteworthy ability to speak English. If it had been known in the diplomatic community in Moscow, he says, he would have been briefed on it.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, shares Toon's skepticism. The C.I.A.'s national intelligence officer for the Soviet Union, who had helped prepare the classified C.I.A. biography of Andropov, also denied to me that there had been "any evidence" that he had a "fluent command of English." John F. Burns, the Moscow correspondent of the *Times*, reported on November 20, "Mr. Andropov's English . . . is open to doubt . . . since he did not use it in his meetings with Vice President Bush on Monday, and even had his written documents in English read to him by an interpreter." The possibility remains, of course, that he is a closet English-speaker. But the columnist Joseph Kraft, who was in Moscow last month for *The New Yorker*, came to the conclusion, after countless interviews with Soviet officials and Western diplomats, that Andropov's comprehension of English, if it exists at all, has been ludicrously exaggerated. Specifically, Kraft was told by Giorgi Arbatov, the Soviet Union's most prestigious "Americanologist" and an associate of Andropov's, that Andropov, to his knowledge, does not speak English—though he had taken English lessons at one time. If this assessment is correct, the accounts of Andropov running an English-language salon in a home crammed with Americana are apocryphal.

IN THE hectic excitement following Andropov's succession, newspapers dredged up eyewitness accounts containing flaws and implausibilities that, under different circumstances, might have disqualified them even as journalistic evidence. For example, *The Wall Street Journal*, in a story headlined "Andropov's Ways: Those Who Met Him Call Soviet Boss Charming But Ruthless," featured the account of a British citizen of Russian origin called Nikolai Sharigan. Sharigan, who had been arrested for espionage in Moscow, claimed that he had been hauled before Andropov when the latter was "head of the K.G.B.," and that he heard Andropov remark, "I think the English Queen won't declare war on us just for Sharigan." Sharigan was then packed off to a Soviet labor camp, where he says he spent ten years before being released in 1976. According to this chronology, however, Sharigan's putative meeting with Andropov would have to have taken place in 1966 at the latest. Yet Andropov did not join the K.G.B. until May 1967, which means that if Sharigan did meet the head of the K.G.B., he did not meet Andropov.

Another witness cited in the same "Those Who Met Him" story is Boris Vinokur, a Russian émigré who publishes a Russian-language newspaper in Chicago. Vinokur is quoted as saying, "he could smile at you and still bite your arm off." Although Vinokur describes Andropov's speech as "articulate," his dress as "quite elegant," his manners as "polite," his home furnishings as "Hungarian," his sports as "tennis and swimming," and his smile as "The Andropov smile . . . faintly sinister though outwardly friendly," it turns out that he has never spoken to Andropov. Vinokur, who defected in 1976, claims only to have seen Andropov at a sanatorium for high-level officials in a forest outside Moscow. Andropov was standing in a group of men some distance from him. He didn't speak with him or even shake hands with him, he says, and the best description he can give of his height is that it is the same as Brezhnev's; i.e., very short. Yet he is also quoted—this time by *The Washington Post*—as saying that Andropov "has the highest I.Q. in the Politburo."

The remaining witnesses who surfaced were Hungarians claiming to have had peripheral encounters with Andropov at diplomatic functions more than a quarter of a century ago. For example, Sandor Kopácsi, a former Budapest police chief, recalls Andropov borrowing the Police Department's gypsy band for a party (though it is not clear why such arrangements would be made personally by the Soviet Ambassador). In a book written in 1979, Kopácsi said that he met Andropov once, at a New Year's Eve party in Budapest in 1955, where he watched Andropov dance with his wife for an hour, and the next day questioned her about her conversation with him. The historical anecdote hunt flushed out a dozen or so Hungarian émigrés willing to claim a brush with Andropov, but not a single concrete detail of his life—such as the name of his wife and/or dancing partner.

WHAT EMERGES from these attempts to piece together a version of Andropov's life is a portrait worthy of "Saturday Night Live": the head of the K.G.B. as one wild and crazy guy. After a hard day at the office repressing dissent, Brezhnev's heir spends the evening at home, telling antiregime jokes in fluent English and playing jazz for dissidents. To be sure, not all the reporting joined this stampede from reality; there were a number of fine examples of more solid and careful reporting, notably the dispatches of John F. Burns and Hedrick Smith in the *Times*. But why the stampede in the first place? Some commentators have made dark references to the Soviet disinformation apparatus. It is unnecessary, however, to plumb such murky depths for an explanation. The excesses that led to the invention of a media Andropov proceed directly from a common conceit of journalism that witnesses and "color" can be found for any great event. When it turned out that the C.I.A. and the State Department had few details about Andropov—not even the name (or fate) of his wife (or mistress)—the press took whatever it could find in the goulash of defectors and émigrés desirous of becoming Andropov experts. For the press, the humbler—and more honest—alternative is to admit that virtually nothing is known about this man called Andropov: not the names of his parents, not his ethnic background, not his education, not his war service, not his preferences in music and literature, not his linguistic abilities, not his ideas. He stands at the head of Russia, but we don't even know how tall.