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Soviet Spokesman on American TV

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MOSCOW, Dec. 29 — Since Vladimir Posner first appeared on American television in 1978 speaking flawless English with a Brooklyn accent, he has become one of the most visible spokesmen the Soviet Union ever put in front of a microphone.

In dozens of appearances on ABC's "Nightline" and other American programs, Mr. Posner has, by satellite from Moscow, defended the Soviet position on everything from the shooting down of Korean Air Lines flight 007 in 1983 to Moscow's current objections to President Reagan's development of a space-based missile defense.

Because of his idiomatic American English, stylish appearance and friendly demeanor, Mr. Posner has played a key role in making Soviet propaganda more polished and persuasive, Western diplomats said.

"He sounds exactly like an American," one diplomat said.

He added, "Posner fits perfectly into Gorbachev's effort to project a more appealing, modern image for the Soviet Union." Mikhail S. Gorbachev is the Soviet leader.

In the process, Mr. Posner has fueled a growing debate about how often, and under what circumstances, Soviet officials or spokesmen should appear on American television, particularly in the absence of reciprocal exposure for American representatives on Soviet television.

Program With Donahue

Today, in his longest single appearance, Mr. Posner was co-host of a program with Phil Donahue called "A Citizens' Summit," that brought 175 Russians in a Leningrad studio and 175 Americans in a Seattle studio together by satellite for a two-and-a-half-hour discussion about their countries and themselves.

The show, which will be broadcast in a one-hour taped version in New York on Saturday on WNBC, is expected to be broadcast on 79 stations around the United States and also in the Soviet Union, according to Edward Wierzbowski, one of the American producers.

He said the program was produced by the King Broadcasting Company in Seattle, a Massachusetts production company called the Documentary Guild and the Soviet State Committee for Television and Radio. Mr. Donahue's company, Multimedia Entertainment, is distributing the program.

Mr. Posner spent his adolescence in the United States, living in Manhattan for nine years when his father worked as an executive for M-G-M.

How a family of Russian Jews who converted to the Russian Orthodox Church but were fervently pro-Communist ended up living like wealthy capitalists in a duplex apartment at

24 East 10th Street is a story Mr. Posner likes to relate.

Relaxing in his comfortably furnished Moscow apartment on Chisty Prospekt last week, he described the odyssey between puffs on a Cuban cigar, one of the benefits, he noted, of living in the Soviet Union.

The bookcase in his study was filled with English works, including "The Final Days" by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, "World of Our Fathers" by Irving Howe and "War and Remembrance" by Herman Wouk. A small American flag hung from a desk lamp with a button stuck in it that denounced censorship.

Mr. Posner said his father, Vladimir Alexandrovich, was born in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, in a Jewish family that had adopted the Russian Orthodox faith.

"My father, as a boy, was caught up in the revolutionary fervor in 1917," Mr. Posner said, "and always had great memories of those times."

The family, however, moved to Berlin and Paris in the 1920's. In 1929 his father, by then a young man, started work at M-G-M and married a French woman. Mr. Posner, whose full name is Vladimir Vladimirovich, was born in Paris on April 1, 1934.

'Practically All-American' at 15

In 1940, considered more Jewish than Russian, the family slipped out of Nazi-occupied Paris with false passports and sailed for New York via Marseilles and Lisbon, Mr. Posner said.

By the time the family left the United States nine years later, he said, "I was 15 and practically an all-American boy."

During the years in New York, Mr. Posner learned English, picked up his Brooklyn accent — "I don't know how" he said — and attended the City and Country School and Peter Stuyvesant High School.

"I was a rich kid from New York with my own bedroom, a playroom, and my family had a cook, two maids and a summer house on Long Island," he said.

But influenced by his father, who dreamed of returning to Russia to join in the development of Communism despite his sizable income from M-G-M, Mr. Posner said he admired the Soviet Union and never felt completely at home in New York.

"Dad had a big map of the Soviet Union on the wall," Mr. Posner said, and during the war he outlined German advances in black and the Soviet counterstrikes in red, "predicting from the start that the Nazis would never conquer Moscow or Leningrad."

Settled in Moscow in '52

In 1949, after Mr. Posner's father was fired by M-G-M and blacklisted because of his pro-Soviet views, according to Mr. Posner, the family moved to the Soviet-occupied zone in Berlin and in 1952 settled in Moscow. He became a Soviet citizen that year.

After studying biology at Moscow State University, improving his Russian, his third language after French and English, and working as a translator, Mr. Posner became an editor and writer in 1961. His broadcasting career began in 1970 as a commentator for the North American service of Radio Moscow, a job he still holds.

"Vladimir Posner's Daily Talk," a five-minute radio commentary in English, is beamed daily by short wave to North America.

Although Mr. Posner described himself as "a product of two cultures" and said "I miss the New York Yankees, franks, ice cream sundaes and American folk music," he is not a man of divided political loyalties.

In an interview published on Dec. 15 in Komsomolskaya Pravda, he said, "I do care about America and there are things about her that are dear to me, a talented literature and music, a remarkable people."

But, he went on in the newspaper, "she also has an amazing ability not to notice suffering."

"A society should be judged not by how it treats its most prosperous members but by how it cares for the weakest and most defenseless," he said, "and in this respect the United States cannot stand up to criticism."

Sitting in his study last week, Mr. Posner, who has a Russian wife and two grown children, said he tries to

"act as a bridge" between the United States and Soviet Union.

"To me the tense relationship between the two countries is painful," he said.

Mr. Posner added, "I have never been asked to say something I didn't believe, but I don't expect viewers in the United States to accept the Soviet position."

He said, "I just want them to understand there is a rationale for the views of this Government."