

Andrzej Krauze comes to London

by Patrick Wright



(AK in Paris, October 2007)

In 1987, some five years after he and his family settled in London, Andrzej Krauze made a large drawing entitled 'Refugees from East Europe'. It showed a couple, with suitcases and a pair of young children, standing on the platform of a London Underground station, apprehensively gazing around at the new world into which they have just been discharged. It is an arresting image: partly autobiographical yet also evocative of a wider history of displacement.

I remember going to meet Krauze a few days after he arrived from Paris with his wife and young son in 1982. He was in a large tenement in Peel Street, west London, a grim 19th century building that Kensington and Chelsea council used as a barracks for the temporary accommodation of newly arrived refugees. The suitcase had been unpacked and Krauze stood there - a man with a bundle of drawings in an otherwise empty and unfurnished room. He would never have admitted it, but, like the figures in many of his drawings, Krauze was a man in a tight spot - uprooted, more or less penniless, and gambling on a future that was still entirely hypothetical.



And yet, even in those early days, he never really seemed like a refugee. The word implies a victim of external circumstances, and Krauze never came across as a remotely abject figure. His departure from Poland, which had predated martial law, was self-willed. And while Krauze had a considerable reputation in his homeland, that did not change his rejection of the political situation there, which had bound him to a largely negative aesthetics. Krauze had cut himself off from that deadlock and he was not inclined to play to Britain's at least century-long romance with the idea of the Polish emigré. He had also put himself in a position where he was going to be totally dependent on his pen, and the things he could do with it.

As I remember them from that tenement, Krauze's drawings were like nothing else in Britain at that time. Some came from illustrated books for children. Others already suggested the still little known works that would soon be producing in tribute to Bruno Schulz, Kafka, and Bob Dylan. But the images that really seemed to fill the room were the politically harnessed drawings that mocked and assaulted the totalitarian regime of General Jaruselski's Poland.

Many of these were defiantly crude onslaughts, which used strong ink lines and ferocious cross hatching to emphasise the violence of the Communist state and then hurl it back in the face of the regime. Here were the military police thugs and the party apparatchiks and state bureaucrats, with their briefcases, microphones and podiums. There were also subtler drawings showing the exercise of anonymous and unaccountable state power: the allegorical rubber that invites a pen to write what it likes and, in one of the most brilliant drawings of this period, the self-moving red pencil that arches up to censor a manuscript as if by its own volition.

These drawings also featured a whole bestiary of animals drafted in from various sources and turned against the totalitarian state. Some of these creatures, fabulous as well as monstrous had roots in Aesop, but others suggested British origins, taken from Lewis Carroll (as illustrated by Tenniel) or George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and then toughened by the experience of



Communism. A slaving wolf rocked a baby sheep in a cradle. Solidarity was portrayed as Jonathan Swift's Gulliver, a giant breaking through the threads with which the tiny Lilliputians had tied him. The 'Polish Spring' was a single flower emerging nervously from Poland's otherwise barren ground only to find a military policeman standing there behind his shield, waiting to extinguish this undesired germination with a truncheon.

In the year of martial law, and with Cold War attitudes very much to the fore, these drawings might have represented exactly what western newspapers expected of a migrant Pole. Yet it was far from obvious that the British press would ever develop a lasting appetite for such undecorative stuff as Krauze's 1981 drawing of a great pig, which had reduced its world to a filthy sty where it sat under the slogan 'I stink therefore I am'. How could such ferocious imagery be applied to the more gently nuanced world of British politics, and who would the targets be?

The first years in London were a difficult period, in which Krauze smiled a lot and spoke relatively little. To begin with, it appeared that people from all over the political spectrum were happy to welcome and assist a dissenting artist from East Europe. Among Krauze's first British admirers was Michael Ivens, the founder and director of Aims of Industry, a right wing pressure group which had spent the seventies rallying British employers to stand firm against the fervidly imagined Red Tide represented by their own workers.

It is not hard to imagine how such men of the right would have interpreted Krauze's drawings showing Karl Marx as a ragged beggar, who has tramped his way through a wrecked Soviet bloc to return to the west, where he could now be found sitting on a pile of battered books and holding out his hat by the walls of the British Houses of Parliament.

Yet the very same drawings would also appeal to those on the left of the political spectrum, who were keen to prove the difference between true socialism and the totalitarian monstrosity that had been created in the Soviet bloc. So it was that, in his early years in this country, Andrzej could be found



making drawings that satirised the works of Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan for publications of the left, like the *New Statesman* and *New Socialist*. And yet he was doing so in a studio improvised out of a freely given spare corner in Aims of Industry's office in Percy Street, London WC1. If you asked Andrzej about the curious knight's move he was playing across the British political spectrum, he would only smile . . .

In his early days in London, Andrzej would most often get the call from British newspaper editors when they wanted to illustrate a story concerned with the Soviet bloc. This may not have been the most imaginative use of Krauze's pen, and it didn't offer a remotely reliable source of employment either. There would be plenty of coverage of the region then known as East Europe when there was a big demonstration or provocation. But there were large tracts of time when the situation behind the Iron Curtain seemed just too dismally grey to attract much attention. Even in liberal papers, you could hear the editors as well as the ever more influential marketing department clamouring for celebrity tittle tattle, or good juicy murder stories involving as much sexual misdemeanour as possible.

It's a great pity that no newspaper gave Andrzej his own weekly space at that point - a kind of 'Krauze's World' in which he could have set the terms of his drawings, chosen their occasions and subject matter and continued to evolve his use of words as well as image. Instead, Andrzej was obliged to insinuate his pen into any space he could find in any article going.

If editors were cautious of employing him, this was at least partly because his eye seemed harsher, and sometimes frankly disrespectful of the foibles and eccentricities of British life. His drawings lacked the cool 'designer' cynicism of an age increasingly defined by advertising imagery.

Krauze's humour seemed disconcerting too. His laughter had nothing to do with the familiar repertoire of superior smirks, sniggers and vulgar snorts that remain the comic inheritance of the British class structure. Indeed, it was a darker laughter that seemed to emerge from a history in which more



was at stake than an increase in the cost of living or a rise in domestic interest rates. It was closer perhaps to the trench humour of the First World War, or of the uproarious laughter that is said to have rung out during the medieval plague. It spoke of a more radical and uncertain experience than has been the normal lot of the British middle classes in recent decades, and, as complaining letters from readers attested, it was capable of producing real distress at the British breakfast table.

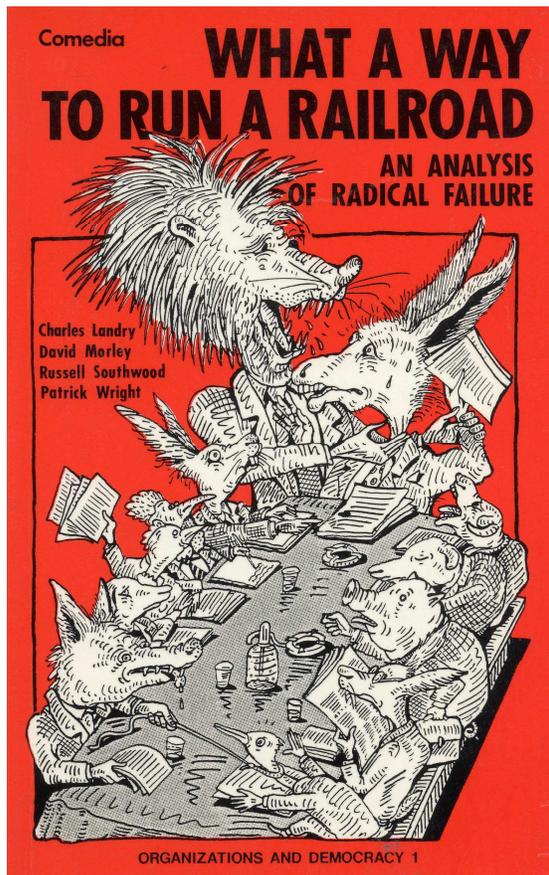
At times Krauze was encouraged to move into portraiture, which is certainly not his speciality, and it was regularly suggested that he might be better off if he adopted a gentler, less ugly style. One famous English cartoonist even offered Krauze a lesson in how to draw in a manner that would be more acceptable to Conservative British readers. It was not an offer that Krauze chose to take up.

For some years, Krauze's situation was extremely unstable, with the phone going hot and cold, and no explanations being provided by the art editors who came and went so chaotically. Krauze got through these periods thanks partly to his ability to work at extraordinary speed. An editor who was stuck for an illustration could phone him, not much more than a few minutes before deadline, perhaps fax him an article that was just about to go to print, and there, after an interval that few native illustrators would have dreamed of accepting, the result would be. Often the article would be a dull and uninspiring thing, but the chances were good that Andrzej would find some way of bringing its theme to life, or of simply ignoring its tedium and going off in an entirely different direction of his own.

It was a pleasure to watch Andrzej releasing his menagerie of symbolic creatures, monstrous as well as fabulous, into British society in the early eighties. At that time I was working for the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, a body concerned to advance the interests of British charities and campaigning organisations. Whenever there was a bit of spare money lying around, we used to employ Andrzej to illustrate bulletins concerned

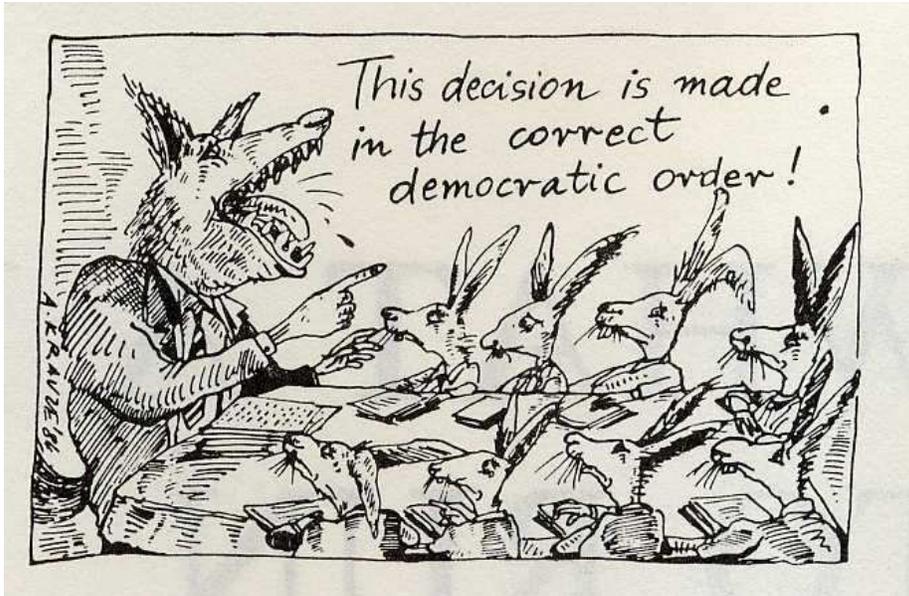
with particular (and often undeniably boring) management problems faced by organisations with social rather than purely financial goals.

The mere mention of 'management' brought that smile to Krauze's face, and soon enough we knew why. The brief-case carrying apparatchiks of martial law were quickly recast as dodgy consultants, and Krauze's animals - Warsaw-bred hybrids of Aesop and Orwell - were soon cavorting on our pages too.



On one occasion, we asked Andrzej to illustrate an issue concerned with the secret hierarchies that persist even in situations where 'collective' or 'co-operative' management is said to rule. His response was perfect. He placed a whole collection of meek citizen-rabbits around a table, where they sat weakly nodding and shyly playing with pencils. At the head of the table sat a huge, bloody-jawed and obviously still Communist wolf saying 'This

decision is made in the correct democratic order'. I remember being told in one strongly feminist organisation that the wolf was obviously a man.



I saw more of Krauze's distinctive magic a year or two later, when he illustrated my book *On Living in an Old Country* (1985). This was an attempt to describe the role of national traditions in present-day England, and to investigate the various cultural dramas in which an idea of 'old England' had come to be aligned against post-war social democracy and the welfare state. I had written it after spending five years out of the country, and was fortunate to find an illustrator with a more distanced eye than was customary in English illustration.

I mentioned the 'prole quarter' from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Andrzej was there, conjuring up an almost completely derelict pub called 'Orwell's Head', with derelict customers vomiting and leaking on the pavement outside. He contributed an image of weird punk mutants, seen scoffing fish and chips under a mad slogan calculated to mock anyone who was inclined to generalise about the working class: 'Long Live the General Interest of the Fish and the Chip'. Memory was portrayed as an infinite regress, in which a man reads the pages of the book growing from the head of another identical but smaller man who reads the pages of a book growing from the head of yet



another identical but even smaller man - and so on, until the whole sequence dwindles into invisibility.

In 1981/2 Andrzej had made a drawing in which a ferocious Soviet crow savaging a helpless Polish eagle, and he now produced a drawing of the British lion and unicorn embroiled in a more equal fight. It was a soft image by comparison with its Polish precursor, yet it did not appear on the cover as Andrzej had imagined. I forget the precise reasons, but the book was eventually printed with an old and faded sepia photograph on its cover – one that showed a nostalgically framed Edwardian interior of a positively English kind. It was the dining room of the house in which Mary Butts had grown up. She was a writer who had fallen in and out of Bohemia in London and Paris, and whose novels of the 1920s and 1930s featured a characteristic gallery of displaced and war-damaged characters, caught between the disruptions of their time and lost patterns of settlement. It was in his drawings for the chapter about her writing, that Krauze launched his own subsequently much travelled character, 'Mr Pen'.

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