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MOSCOW AT THE OLYMPICS

It wasn't merely revenge for Jimmy Carter's boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games that caused the Soviets to announce that their athletes would not be permitted to participate in the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles this summer. The Communists are not petulant, they are purposeful.

In pondering their 1984 decision, the masterminds in the Kremlin had to take into account two unprecedented variables: the new anti-Communist movie "Moscow on the Hudson" and the "Ban the Soviets Coalition" in Los Angeles, a group of 165 ethnic-based organizations which has been plotting ways to help Soviet-bloc Olympic athletes to defect.

"Moscow on the Hudson" is about a Russian saxophone player who comes to America as part of the band playing for a circus. He defects in Bloomingdale's in New York City and, after an exciting chase by his KGB guards up and down the escalators, he finds an assortment of new friends who help him make his home in free America.

The contrast between life in Russia and life in America is dramatic. As one of the immigrants in New York City boasted, "I can do anything -- it's America."

The most interesting part of the movie is the first part showing life in Russia before the defector comes to America. The movie realistically shows the long lines of Russian men and women silently and somberly standing in line in bitter weather for a chance to buy such elementary household necessities as toilet paper.

It shows that the first instinct of any Russian when he sees a queue is to join it, even before finding out what is being sold at the end of the long wait. It shows that the best present a man can bring his girl friend is a roll of toilet paper for which he stood in line.

The movie shows another artist who had the temerity to protest the invasion of Afghanistan. He was sent to a mental institution, and now the best job he can get is cleaning the city streets. The movie shows the people's pervasive fear of criticizing the government, even in the privacy of their homes.

The movie shows how the hope of getting a good apartment depends on joining the Communist Party. It shows how shoes are available only in one size at a time, and how the fellow who wears a different size must wait until another year.

The plot of the movie is a successful defection. For Americans, that's entertainment. One wonders if any Soviet agents in this country will be forbidden to see it; the KGB certainly wouldn't see any humor in that.

The "Ban the Soviets Coalition" announced that it is ready, willing, and able to help Soviet and Eastern-bloc athletes to defect. It will distribute brochures setting forth U.S. laws on defection and immigration, instructions on how to defect, and telephone numbers to call for help.

The Coalition will have a 24-hour toll-free telephone number with multilingual operators who will direct callers to a defection aid center. The Coalition has already lined up two lawyers and 50 safe houses to hide the defectors from the KGB agents who will try to "persuade" the athletes not to return to Iron Curtain countries (as they tried so unsuccessfully in "Moscow on the Hudson").

And there is much, much more. Demonstrators will yell pro-defection messages in six languages through red, white and blue megaphones. The Coalition will sponsor billboards in Russian and other languages urging defection. Low-flying planes carrying banners with hot-line telephone numbers will fly over the Olympic games.

The Soviet Olympic chairman, Marat Gramov protested that the Coalition's actions constitute "threats" bordering on "violence" that will have a chilling effect on Soviet competition. He asked the Reagan Administration to denounce the group.

State Department legal counselor Ed Derwinski, however, said, "Under any stretch of the imagination, I don't think the Soviet government has the right to ask us to denounce any group which has a free right to express their views. We're in a free country. If a group wants to express itself, fine, as long as they don't break any laws while doing it."

The free American spirit, with all its ingenuity and humor, poses a real problem to the men who call the shots in the Kremlin. To the Soviets, the embarrassment of potential Gold Medal defections was simply greater than the propaganda value of winning the medals in the first place.