

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DBP-14

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
ICWA
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755
U S A

May 12, 1991

Vladimír Renčín: "I See the Bohemian Lion"

Dear Peter,

Of the dozen well-known cartoonists working in Czech, Vladimír Renčín [**Ren-chen**] is perhaps the best. I first saw his work on postcards I bought here in 1987. In my first ICWA newsletter, I sent you three of his cartoons. In this one I'm sending two dozen. They were among many that were originally intended for a book to be published soon after the revolution. A French firm was interested in publishing them in French. When I met Vladimír Renčín in February of this year, he was worried that the French wouldn't understand the jokes (even if translated) and that the concept of the book would be out of date by the time of publishing.

But, it is by far not only Czechs who appreciate Renčín's humor. He has, for example, illustrated at least three books for German authors. IBM in Germany published a calendar of Renčín's computer-oriented humor. He regularly draws cartoons related to science and especially to computers and man's relation to them. In addition to his work for Czech papers such as Lidové noviny and his weekly page in Mladý svět, a magazine to which he has been contributing for years, Renčín illustrates for the US Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the British New Scientist, and the German newspaper Die Zeit (for many years now), as well as the journals GEO and Bild der Wissenschaft (in which he has a full page in color every week). Germans also published a book exclusively of Renčín's drawings (Renčín's Beautiful New World).

Derek Paton, a Fellow of the Institute, is studying
the arts and culture of Czechoslovakia

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Words are, nevertheless, very important to Renčín. In fact, he even insists that they be written by hand on his cartoons so that they are not depersonalized and so that they visually suit the drawing. I think that anyone who wants to understand Czechs can gain a good deal of insight from these cartoons. They are very Czech and still very up to date.

Vladimír Renčín was born in 1941. Since his childhood he has been living in Hradec Králové, a town of over 100,000 inhabitants, just a couple of hours drive to the north-east of Prague. Renčín prefers to stay in Hradec with his wife and daughter. His parents live around the corner. One of the main reasons he stopped doing the front-page cartoon for Lidové noviny was because when his cartoons got to Prague a day or two after the editors requested them, the ideas were no longer as relevant. The task was therefore left to the excellent Prague cartoonist Vladimír Jiránek and the Slovak Fedor Vico. When Renčín does leave town it's usually to go to his cottage in the mountains. He has a larger studio there and a library full of old books found during years of foraging in secondhand bookstores.

Renčín loves literature and near the end of the 1960s he was able to try his own hand at more extensive writing when a theater in Hradec Králové offered him the chance to write a libretto for "The Most Beautiful War." Much to Renčín's surprise, this musical played in several towns and ran in Prague at the ABC Theater for 150 shows. About ten years ago, he began to make lithographs, which he combined with his cartoons to illustrate a novel on angling by Ota Pavel (a project he had long desired because of its theme and author). Renčín also made a 13-part animated series for television, "The Animals of Mr. Krbec."

It was a bitterly cold February morning when I went to Hradec Králové, and there was no heating in the bus for the whole two-hour ride. The elderly woman riding beside me mumbled in indignation and discomfort and then hollered at the driver to turn up the heat.

"Can't do a thing 'bout it madame," said the driver interrupting his conversation with a friend who was leaning over the back of the driver's seat.

"Can't? What kind of nonsense is that? 'Can't?!"

"Out of order, madame."

"Then, get it fixed!"

"Don't have the parts, madame," replied the driver in the same matter-of-fact tone.

"Humph! At these new prices, too," she hissed and turned to look out the window.

A bit later, I dug into my briefcase and pulled out two books of Renčín's cartoons that I was bringing to get autographed. When I began to chuckle at some of the jokes, the woman looked out of the corner of her eye at the book but never once did she show any reaction. She must be in the minority, I thought as I read an old interview from the magazine Mladý svět ("V.R. aneb Vlastní rukou," by Rudolf Křešťan, 1984), which, among other things, describes a show Renčín had in 1982 in the Town Hall gallery on Old Town Square. A total of 140,000 people came to have a look.

The visitors books from these shows are great reading for Renčín. He learned from the book at the 1982 show that "One woman even had me mentioned in her boss's work assessment. On the door of her office she had stuck one of my cartoons in which one character says to the other, 'Try to look stupid, we're going into a government office. Can you do mime?' Her boss wrote in his appraisal of her performance that the cartoon she had posted 'Makes light of the work of the organization.'"

Renčín has a close relationship with his readers and admirers, who respond to his work in creative and unusual ways. "Before one New Year's, I published a cartoon in which Dlabáček -- the one in the hat -- calls out to the countryside: 'I drink to all people of good will with the exception of Rambousek, who owes me 20 crowns! After several weeks, letters began to come in, and out of them fell 20-crown bills. All the letters were from Rambouseks from different corners of Czechoslovakia. The content of each letter was roughly the same, to the effect 'I want to enter the new year with a clean slate.' It didn't seem in good taste to return the money, and sometimes the return address was missing. I spent the money on red wine and drank to the honor of all Rambouseks who demonstrated their individual, rare sense of humor."

Renčín described another reaction from a reader. "A cartoon of a historical battle was printed. In the middle of the slaughter, a man steps in and calls out: 'Today's lucky numbers in the lottery are 5, 12, 24, 31, and 41.' A woman from Kladno [a mining town close to Prague] actually bet those numbers in the Sports Lotto and won 500 crowns [which at that time was the average rent for a month]. But because she developed a taste for this, she wrote me back asking that I send her more numbers -- this is where humor's possibilities end."

When I reached his home in Hradec Králové, Renčín had a pile of cartoons that he had selected for me on his coffee table. After sorting through them, I chose the following two dozen. Each cartoon easily conjures up real life. I've translated and then arranged the cartoons in an order that corresponds to three chronological stages of recent events here. The first few cartoons poke fun, like people quietly did before November 1989, at the ruling Communists, the Soviets, and at Communist ideology.

The next few are scenes from day-to-day life in Czechoslovakia. The two middle-aged women, weighed down with their nylon sacks of groceries in each hand, are typical victims of the shop-to-shop hunt for various items of food, the half-hour wait in line at each shop, the long trip home by foot and public transport, all of which clearly leaves its mark on the shoppers and in this case brings them ever farther from ideals of beauty that they now see plastered on billboards (or as sculptural decoration on the art nouveau buildings).

Renčín also draws scenes of Czech consumerism. Westerners do not normally associate satellite dishes, foreign-made televisions, foreign cars, and other trappings with Communism, but these trappings were not that uncommon in Czechoslovakia before November 1989. The way of getting these goodies was, however, quite uncommon and frequently led to snide comments from suspicious fellow citizens. Sometimes the comments were based on a notion of the betrayal of Communist ideals, but they also stem from hypocrisy, envy, and pettiness, something that Renčín points out is endemic and destructive in current Czechoslovak society.

"The good life" on the whole was a rarity, and the gap between it and the day-to-day grind was great. A hunt for shoe-laces, for instance, could end up causing not only a headache but also a fit of hysteria -- either on the part of a weary customer or on the part of a weary and usually indifferent sales person. Stalinist terror tactics on the whole were not as effective as the tactic of sealing off the country from outside influences and defeating the opposition by this daily war of attrition waged against the average citizen. Anything extra that a person wished to undertake, say a trip abroad or the founding of a club based on some hobby, required so much paper work and entailed so many official refusals and delays that even once the major restrictions on travel and acquiring foreign currency were eased or lifted in the mid-1980s, the remainder of the built-in and disguised obstacles were enough to stop the average citizen even before he started. No wonder when you asked a Czech how he was the honest answer was very often "Špatně!" (Bad!), "Ani se neptejte!" (Don't even ask!), or at best a matter-of-fact "Jde to." (Alright). A friend of mine who is a psychologist told me that if she had asked one of her patients how he was and he would have answered "Very well!", she, and probably most other Czechs, would have thought

there was something wrong with him or at least something suspicious in his attitude. Similarly, one is not sure whether one is hearing uncertainty, fear, naivety, or guile in the voice of Renčín's villager who, carrying his hot lunch from the farm collective's canteen in a little pail, responds to one of the rusty old loudspeakers present in every village, "I do go to work optimistically. Always." The obvious falsity of the response to sterile, repetitive Communist ideology is what's funny.

The next set of cartoons reflect the post-November period, when movements, associations, and parties were springing up all over the country, when dubious characters were making it to leading positions, and when it was hard to tell who was dubious and who was clean. This came to a head in the screening in parliament in April (last month) when the names of parliamentary deputies who were listed as collaborators on secret-police files were finally made public.

The positive side of the changes, which is the basis of the themes in the third part of this collection of cartoons, is reflected primarily by the slogan "Back to Europe!" At least two questions, however, arise: Does Europe really want Czechoslovakia and the other East European states, and do Czechs and Slovaks really want Europe and are they willing to work and adapt themselves to get there? Renčín's character in the backyard of the cottage or farmhouse who says "Let Europe come here to look at me from time to time," is not, I don't think, an exception. Many people are waiting for prosperity, but passively. One Czech idiom literally translated, which fits this attitude, says "They expect the roasted pigeons to fly right into their mouths." The road to prosperity is not only through hard work, but also through investment. This raises the obvious and easily manipulatable specter facing any country open to foreign investment, namely, foreigners buying out the country's natural (and some say, national) resources. Renčín's cartoon on this subject is bitter-sweet but perhaps inaccurate, since apparently it is not the Americans but the Germans who are, and will be, investing the most capital in Czechoslovakia.

The investment is obviously an absolute necessity if democracy is going to take root. People want more than anything to see material changes in their life, which will lead to a palpable improvement, and not to a decline, in their standard of living. If they get impatient it's possible that they won't vote for the most democratic party but for the one that promises them their roasted pigeons. Even Renčín has a slight hint of playful pessimism in his cartoons on this subject. But, when he says "In a hundred years, we'll laugh about it all," the prediction is in a way overly pessimistic. Just reading Renčín is proof we don't have to wait so long to laugh.

THOSE BORN TO A FUNCTIONARY'S FAMILY CAN'T, AFTER ALL,
MARRY BESS, THE MILLER'S DAUGHTER, A GIRL OF LESSER MARXIST BIRTH.



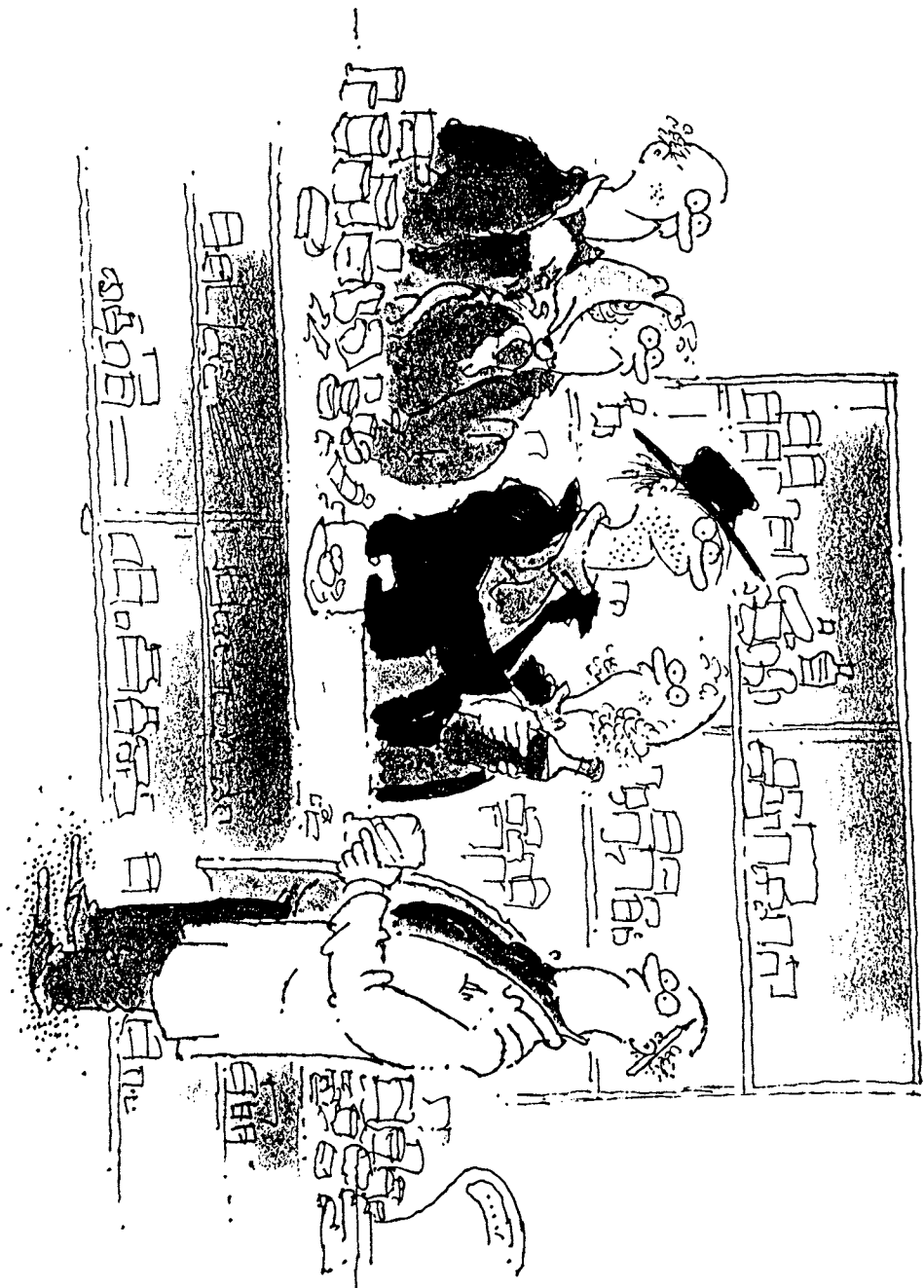


SECOND PHASE OF THE REVOLUTION, HIS IDEAS HAVE PROGRESSED FROM HIS HEART TO HIS STOMACH.
THE NEXT PROGRESSION IS FORESEEABLE.

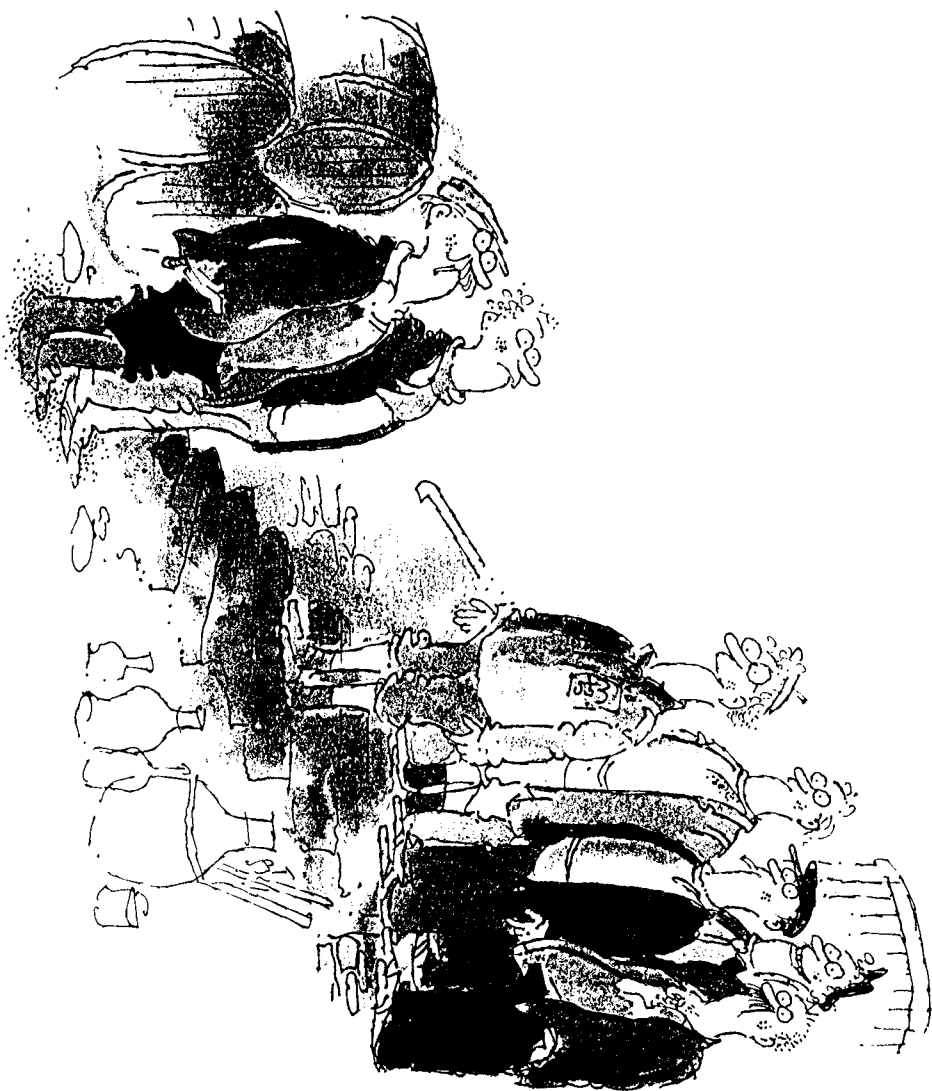
I'M DOING THE IRONING, RUDOLF'S DOING BATTLE WITH TOTALITARINISM.



RUM. SECOND ONLY TO THE SOVIET UNION. MY BEST FRIEND.



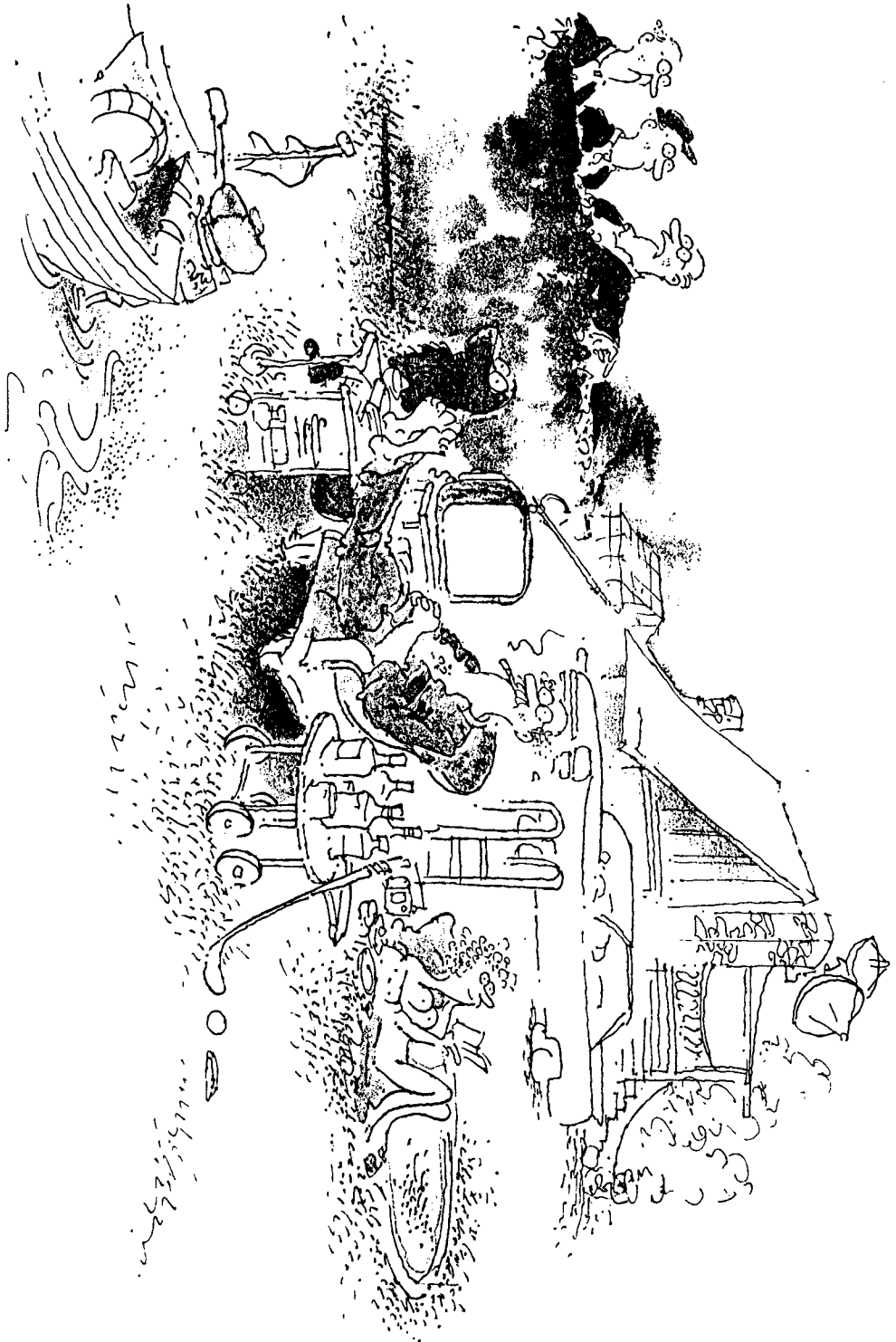
HAIL COMRADE VINTNERS! THESE ARE FRIENDS FROM THE VLADIVOSTOK VINAER FACTORY.
THEY'VE COME TO PASS ON THEIR EXPERIENCE TO YOU.



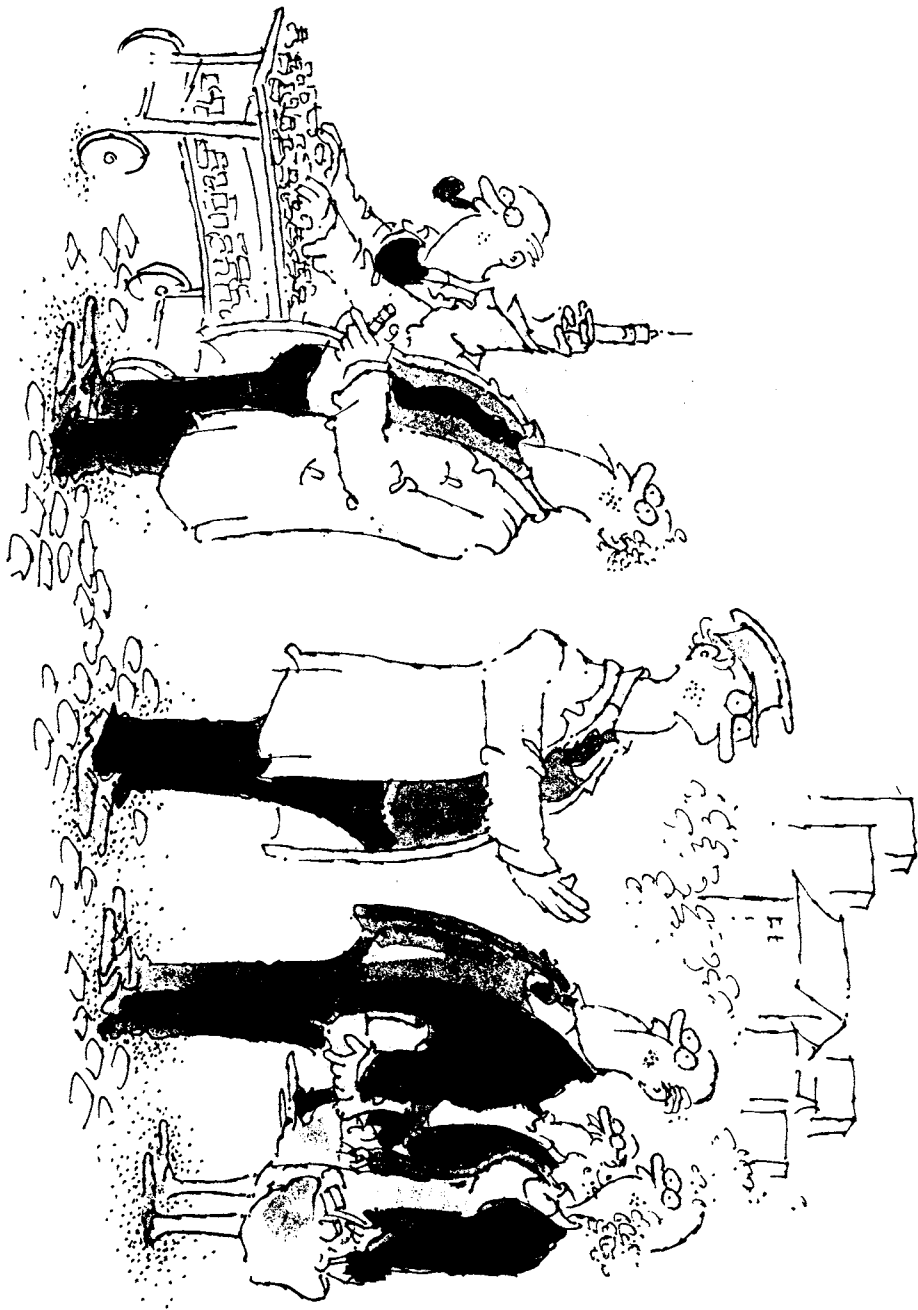
I'D LIKE TO SEE HER AFTER GRADUATING FROM TEN YEARS OF REAL-EXISTING SOCIALISM!



TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT HOW EVERYBODY WHO BETRAYS OUR IDEALS ENDS UP.



KINDLY STRIP. IT'S AN OBLIGATORY VACCINATION AGAINST ENVY, HYPOCRISY, AND PETTINESS.



FRIENDS, YOU'RE ALL GRADS OF THE NIGHT SCHOOL OF MARXISM-LENINISM
SO YOU TELL EACH OTHER WHY THERE ARE NO SHOELACES.



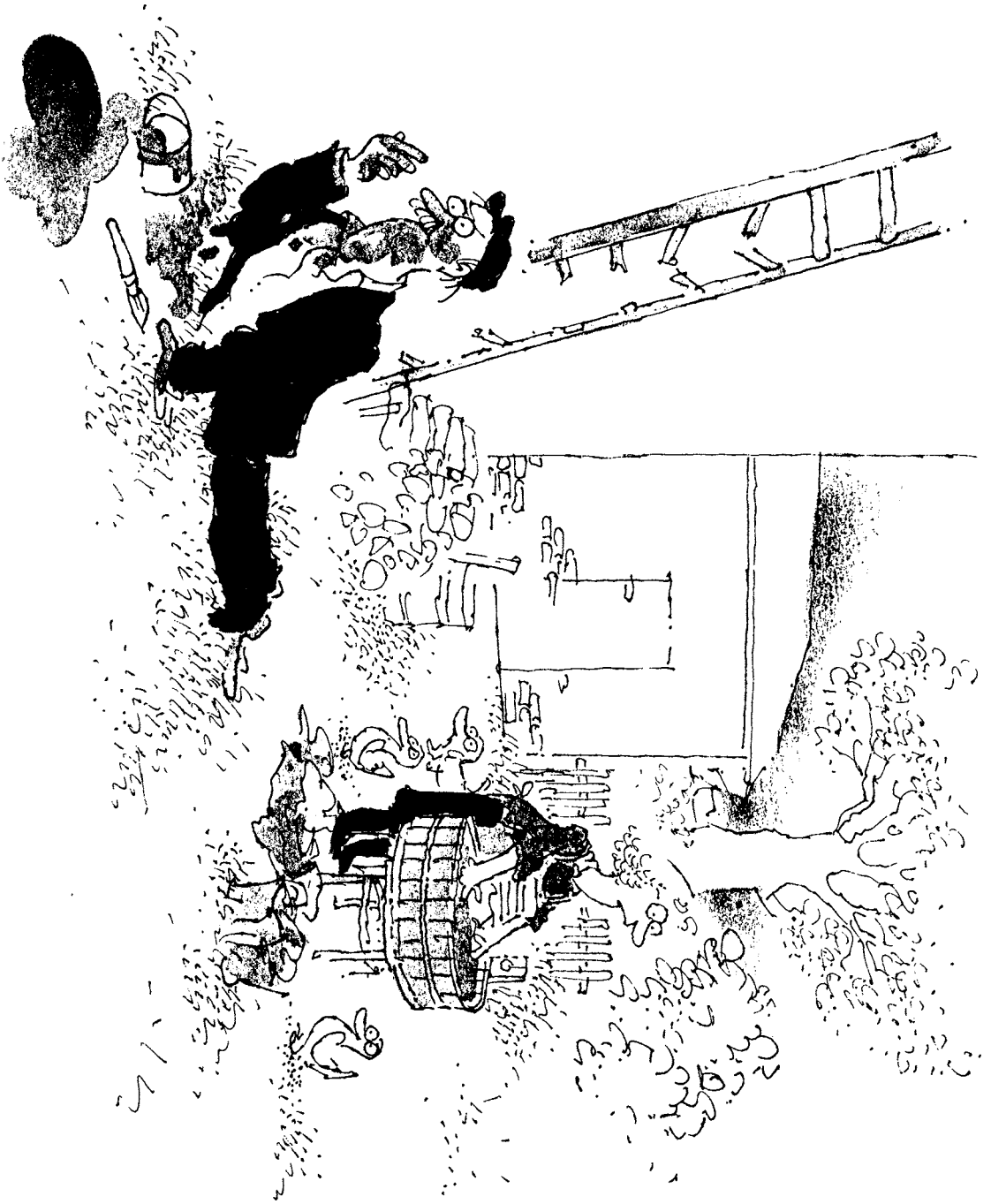
HERE ARE THE NEEDLES. YOU FINISH MAKING IT AT HOME.



WE'RE NOT PERVERTS, YOUNG MAN, BUT WE GET A REAL JOY OUT OF SEEING THAT SOMETHING HERE ISN'T OUT OF ORDER.



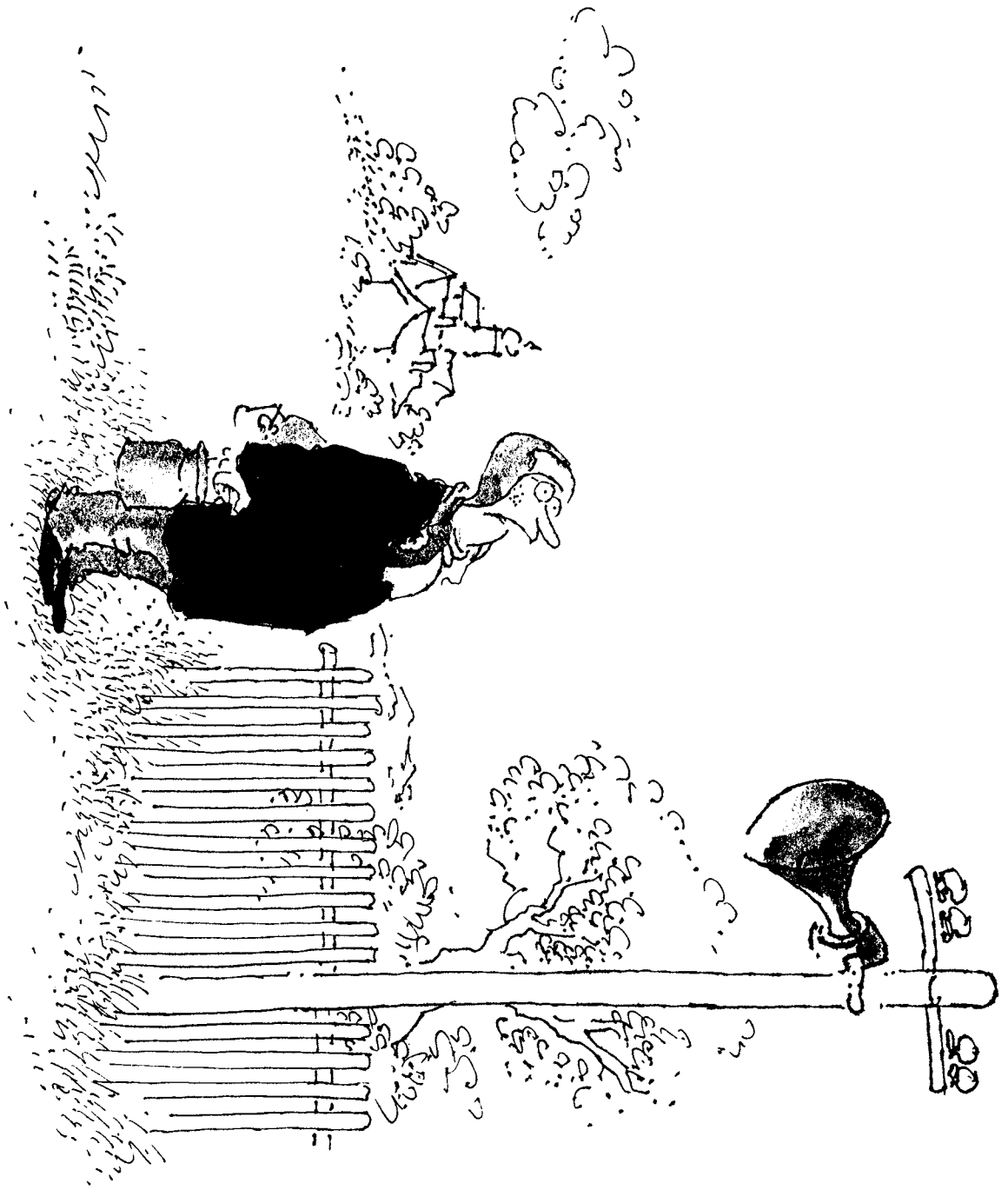
CAREFUL FRANK. IT'S NOT ALL THE COMMUNIST'S FAULT.



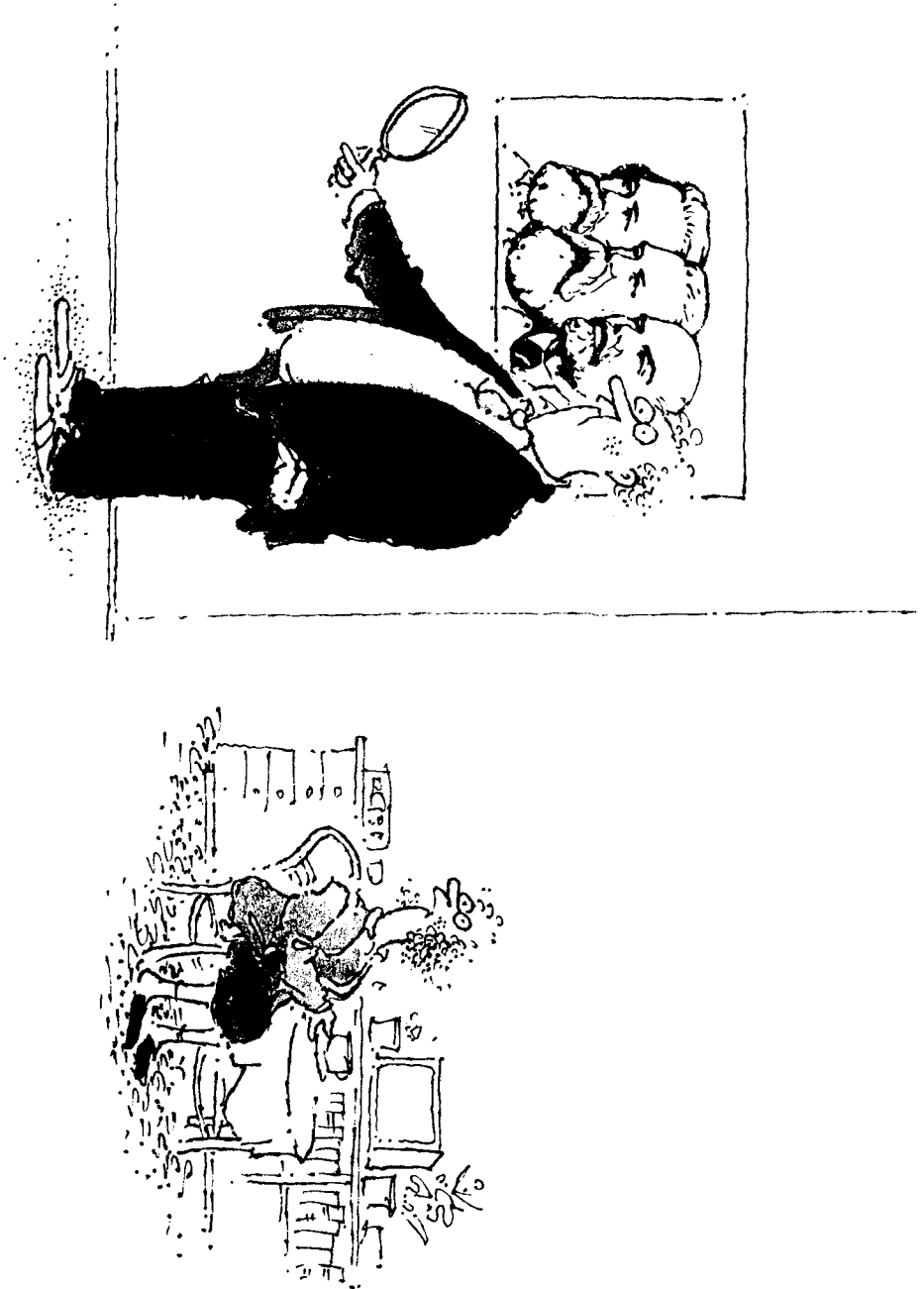
I LIKE MY FELLOW CITIZENS, DOCTOR. MAYBE I'M NOT NORMAL.



BUT I DO GO TO WORK OPTIMISTICALLY. ALWAYS...



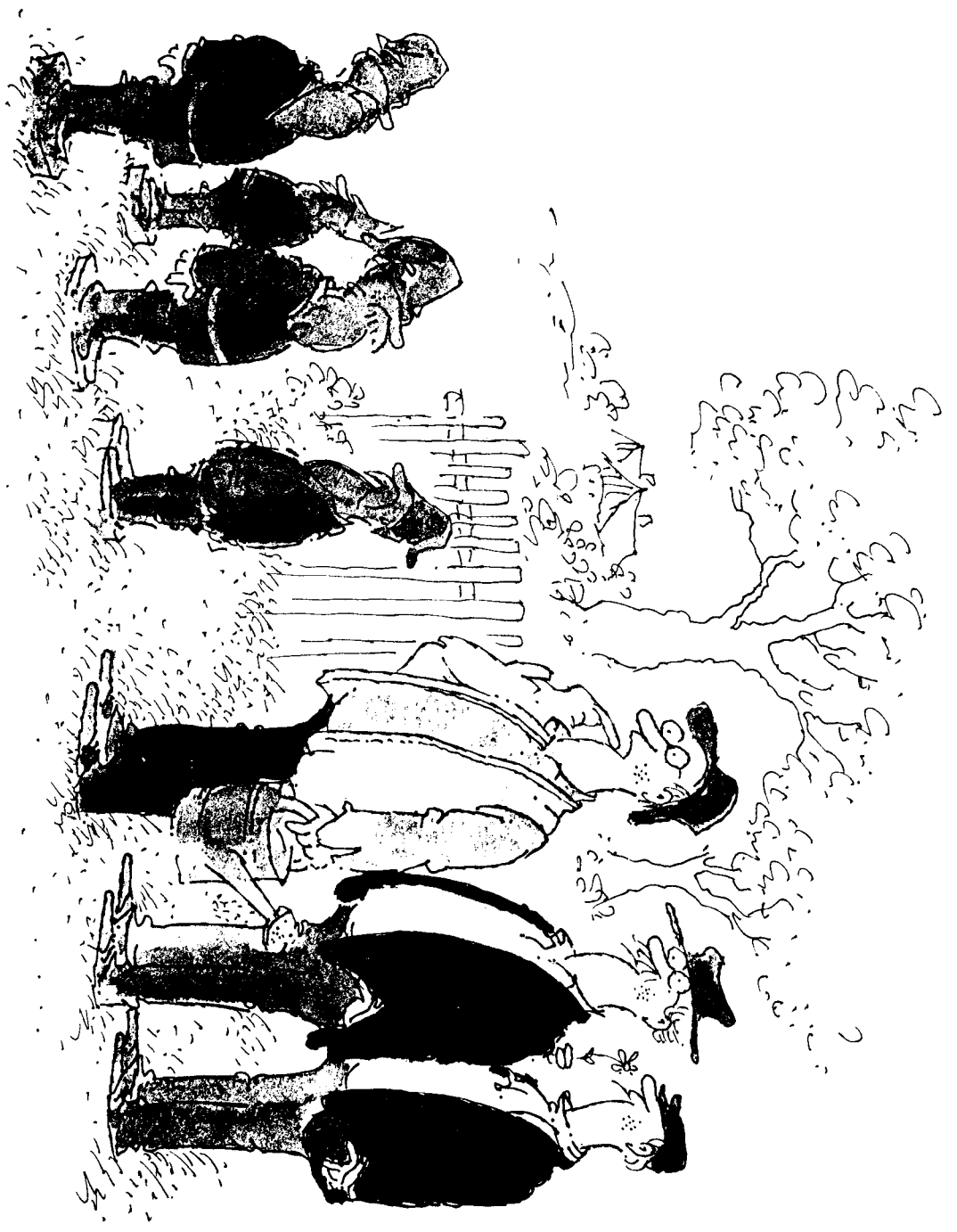
KAREL, THAT'S ENOUGH OF THAT. I HOPE IT HASN'T OCCURED TO YOU TO START A NEW PARTY!



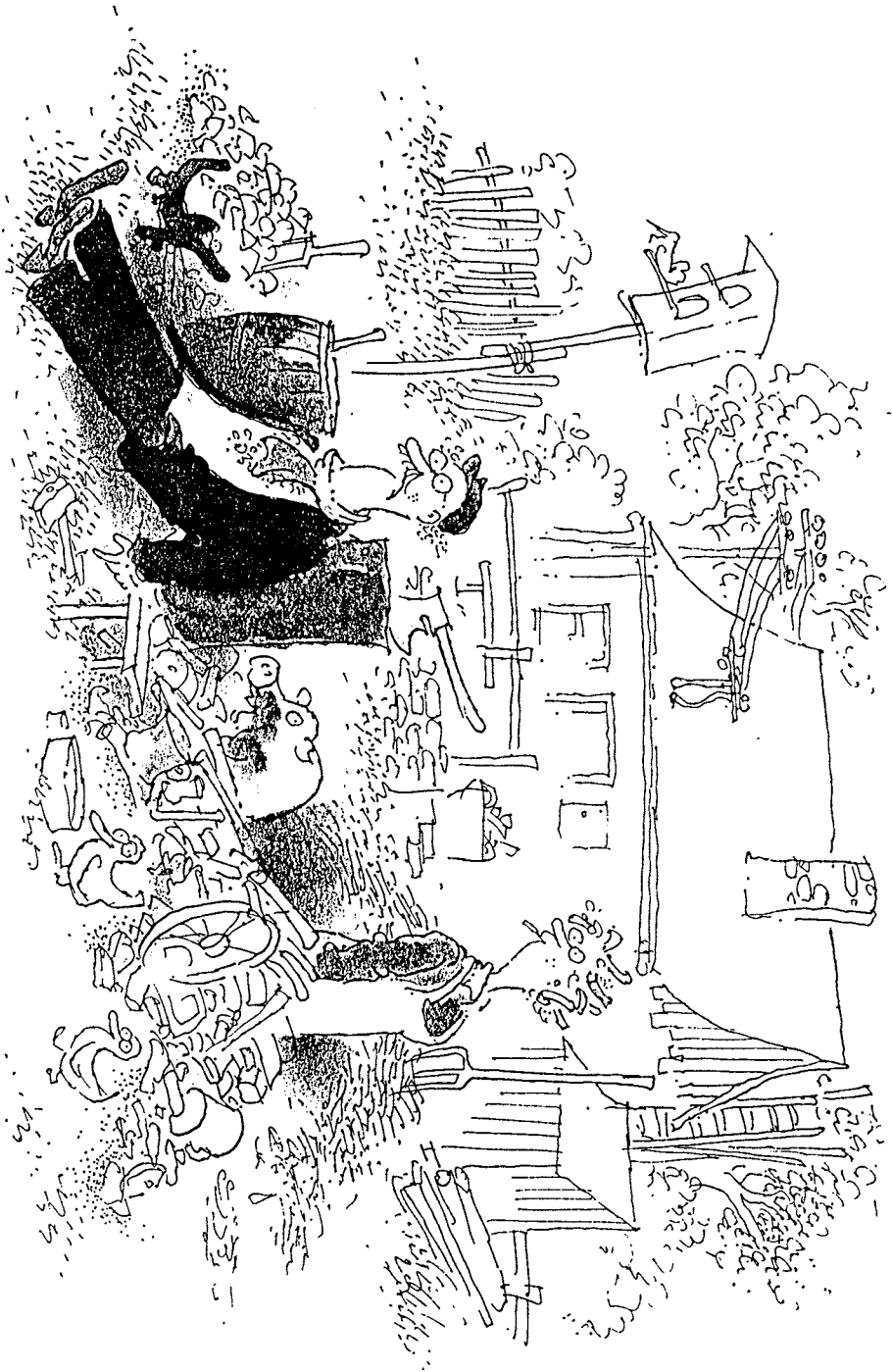
WHY IS IT THAT SOME BEASTS GET ALONG JUST AS WELL UNDER ANY REGIME?



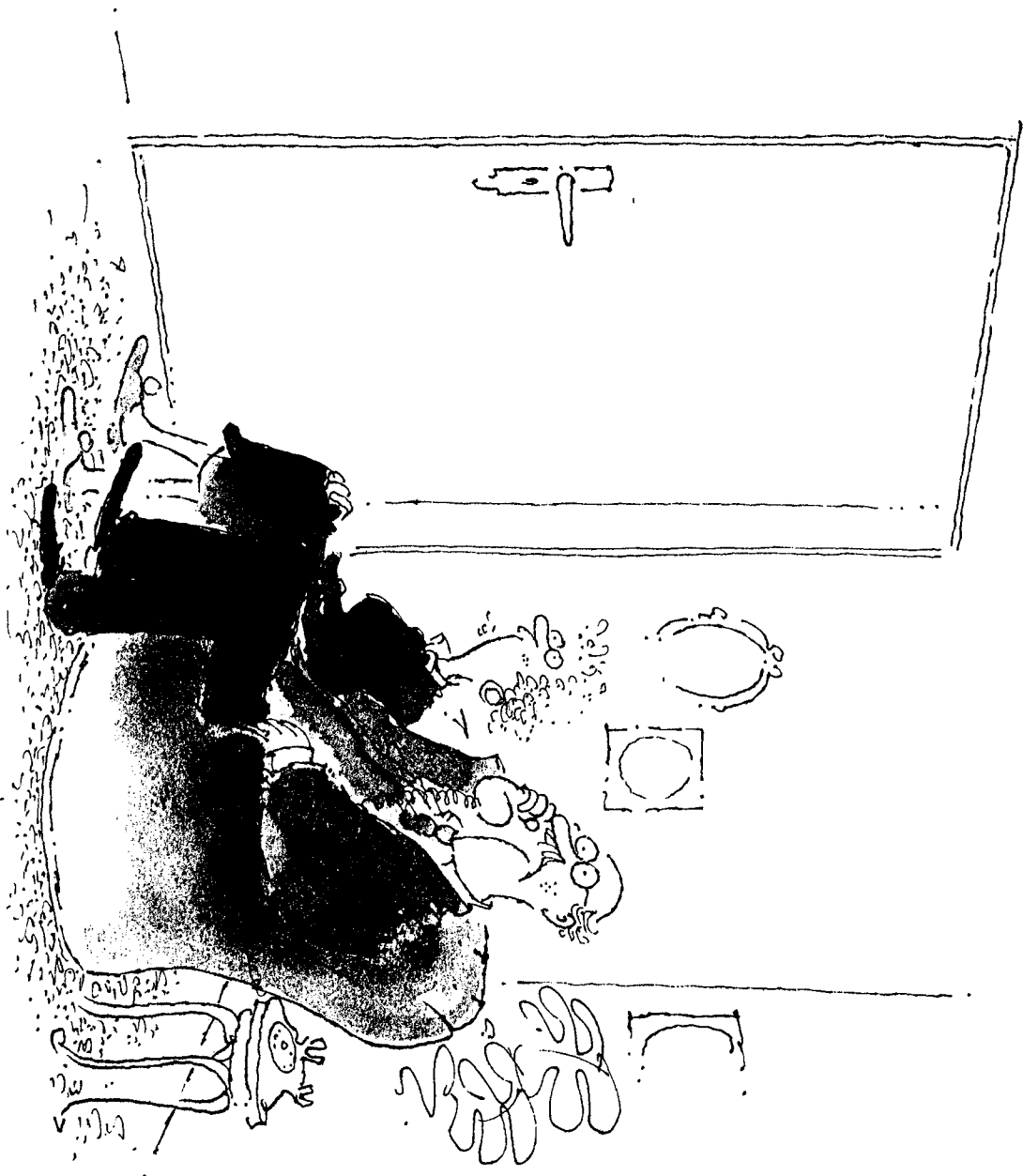
ONE OF EM IS DEFINITELY AN INFORMER, BUT HOW DO YOU TELL WHICH ONE!



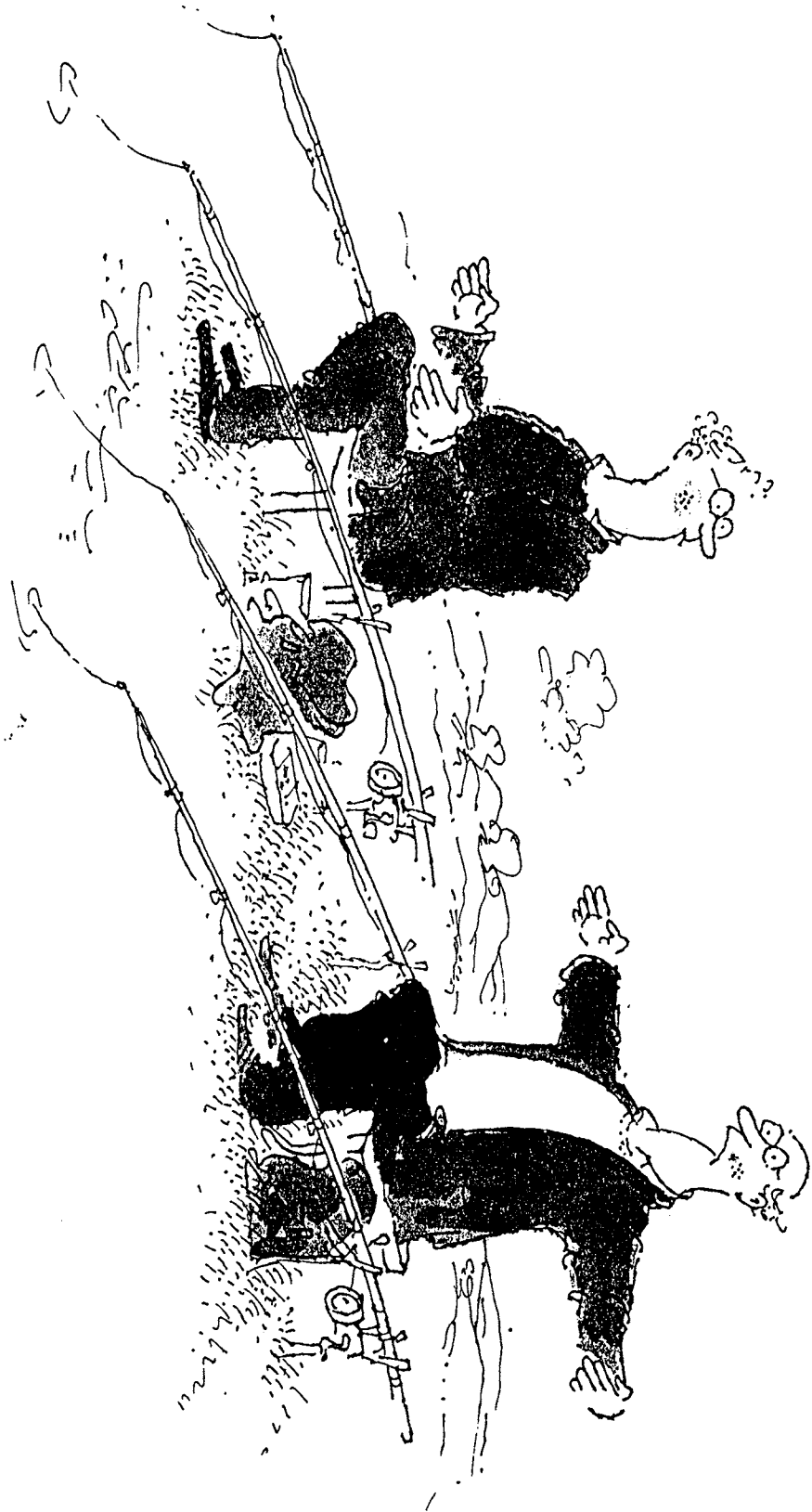
I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE. I LIKE IT HERE. AND IF IT CAN'T DO WITHOUT ME
LET EUROPE COME TO ME TO HAVE A LOOK FROM TIME TO TIME.



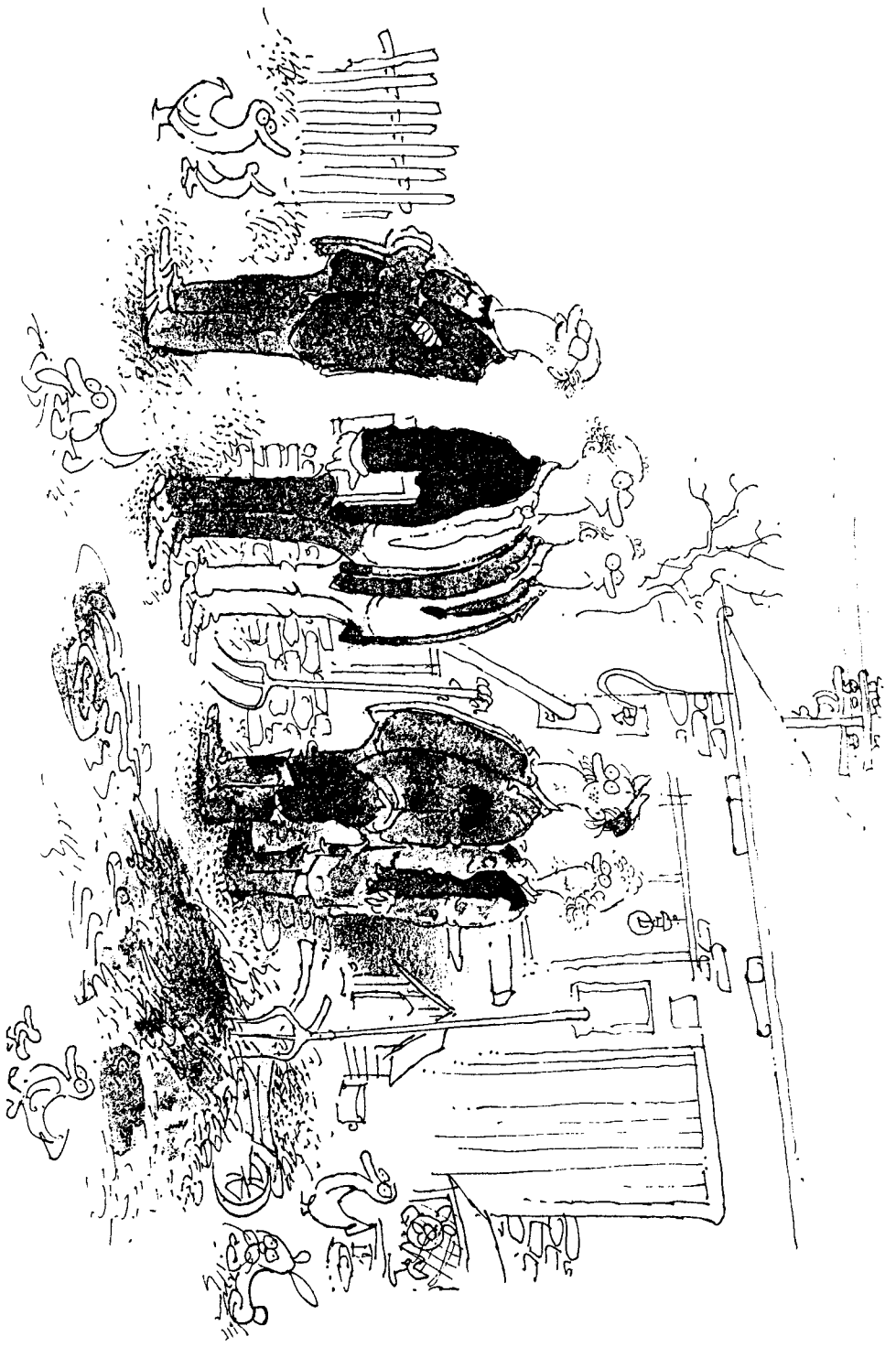
EXACTLY WHAT WE SHOULD BE DOING. SITTING HERE AND WAITING FOR PROSPERITY.



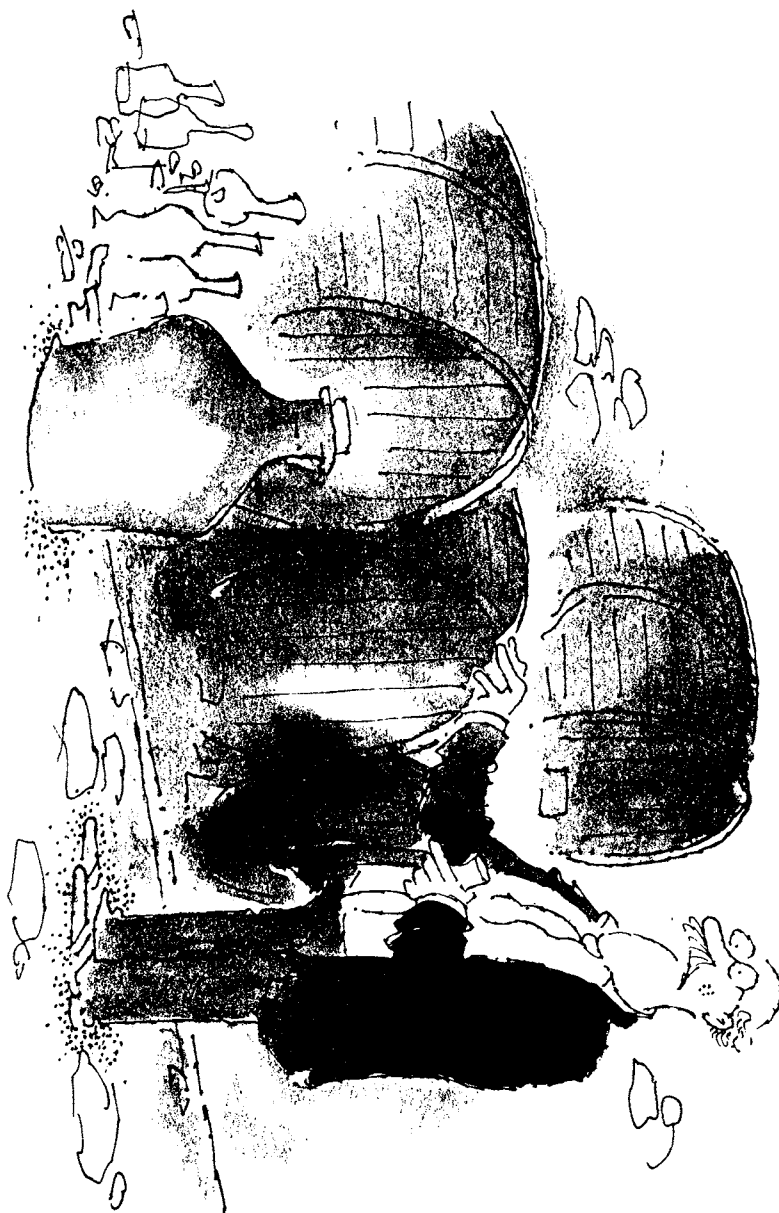
NOT LIKE THIS, BUT A DEMOCRACY LIKE THIS, I'M TELLING YOU.



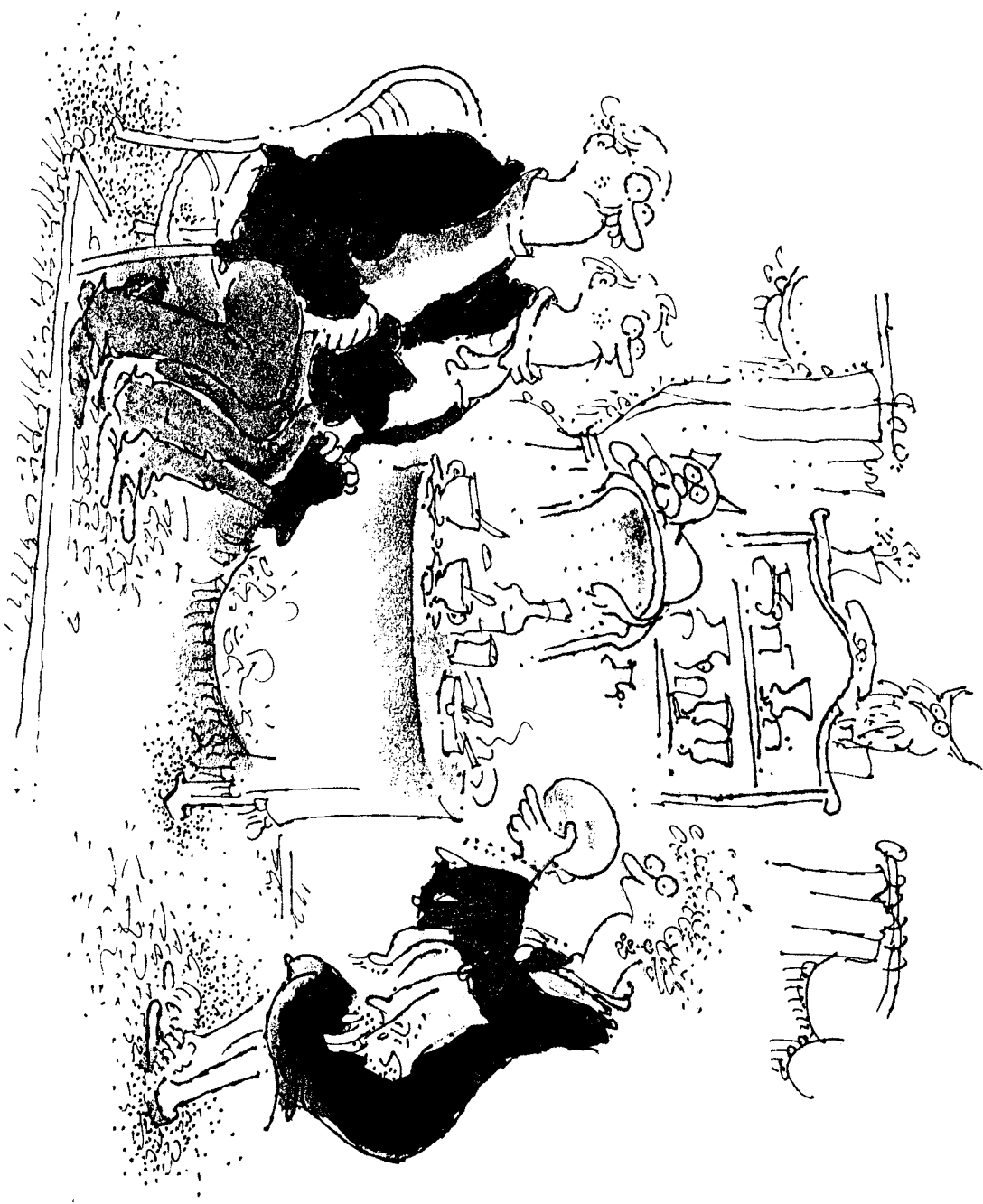
THIS IS MR. SMITH FROM THE USA. HE'S BUYING EVERYTHING HERE AND IS GOING TO MAKE AN ECONOMIC MUSEUM OUT OF IT.
YOU WON'T BE AFFECTED TOO MUCH APPARENTLY YOU CAN KEEP ON GRUNTING HERE.



THANK YOU YOU'VE HELPED ME MAKE IT THROUGH TOTALITARIANISM.



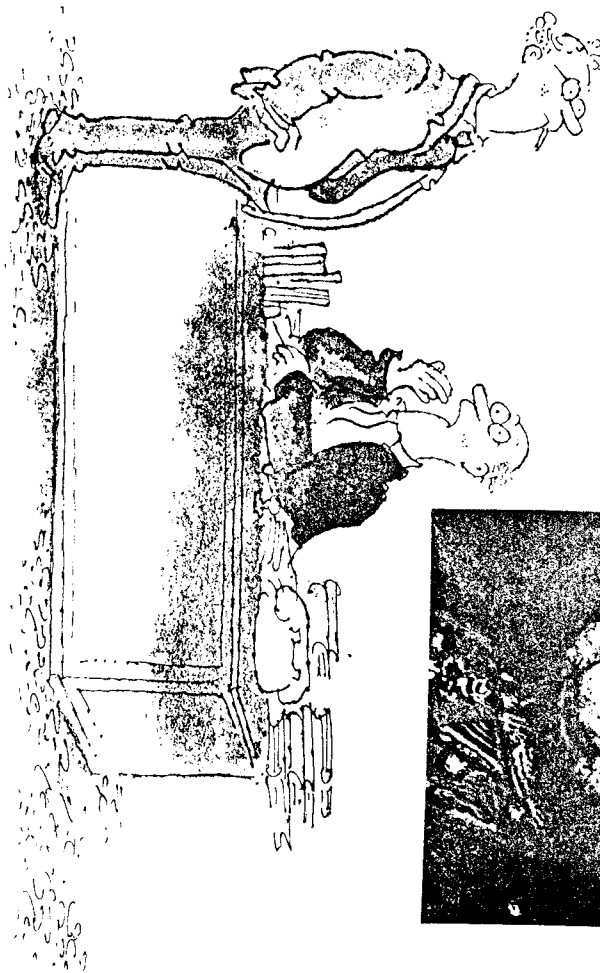
I SEE THE BOHEMIAN LION. HE AWAKES ... STRETCHES ... HE ROARS .. PEES ... AND AELS ASLEEP AGAIN.



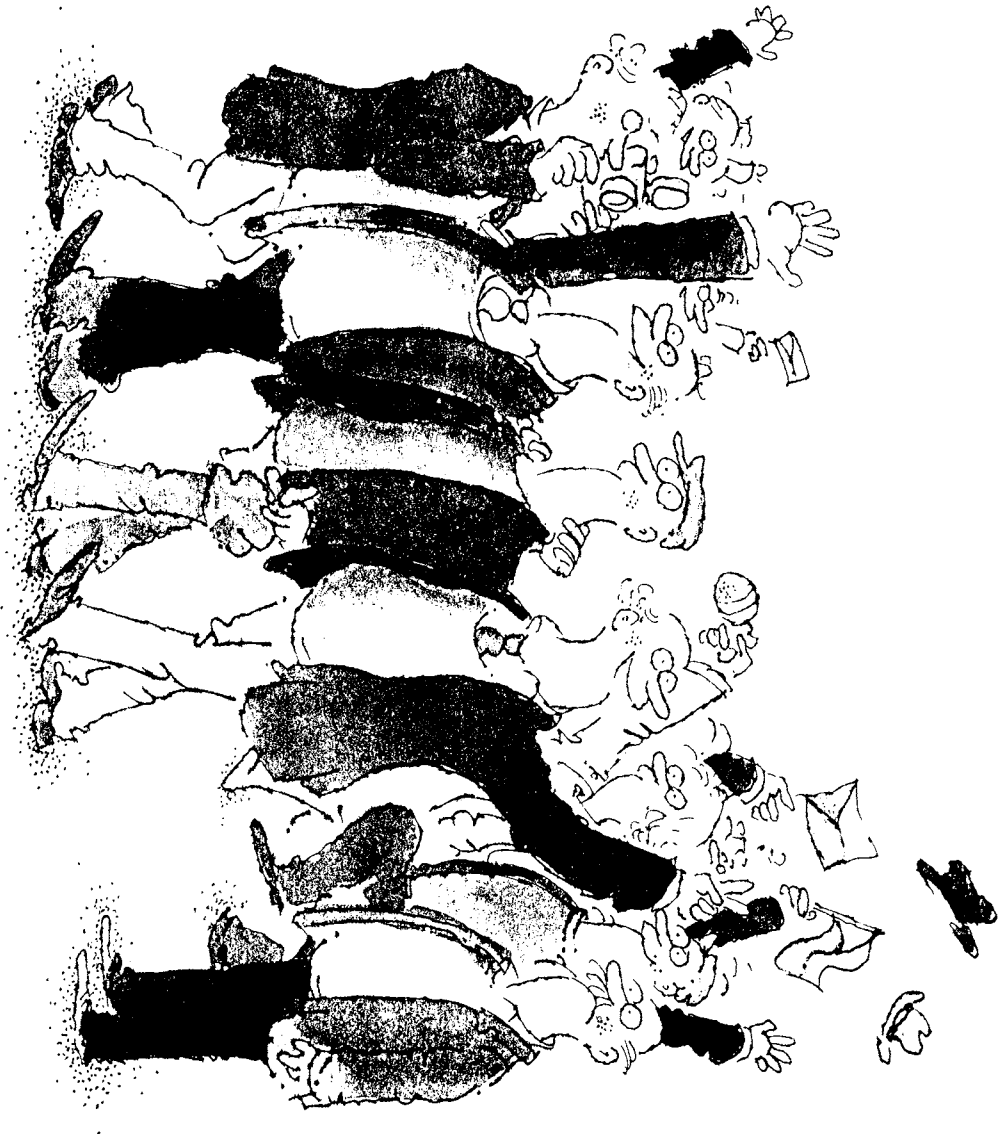
WE'RE ENJOYING DEMOCRACY. ONE NEVER KNOWS HOW LONG IT'LL LAST.



GOOD GOD, I THOUGHT IT WAS MARX!



OUR FIRST PRIVATE ENTREPRENEUR TO GO BUST!



FORWARD LADS, FORWARD! IT'S A MISERABLE ROAD BUT IN A HUNDRED
YEARS WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT IT ALL.

