'ED THE RED' HAMS IT UP

Radio operator aids ex-USSR countrymen

By GRAY BASNIGHT

CALLING ED THE RED. Come in, Ed the Red.

Ham radio is the place where the world meets on the amateur airwaves. In New York, one Brooklyn ham is rapidly becoming an international airwave legend. Edward Kritsky — "Ed the Red" on the air — came from Leningrad to the U.S. in 1979. But he hasn't forgotten his roots, or the needs of the people now trying to build a better system in his former Communist homeland.

Most nights Ed — station NT2X — beams around the world till 2 a.m., tuning in his network of friends. And he has far more friends than many people do. Of the 50,000 hams in Russia, about 15,000 of them are active, and Ed the Red has spoken to most all of them. Sometimes they stack up on the airwaves just to wait for a chat, to question Ed about American customs, or to pass on messages. There's no way to know how many are actually listening, because there are far more receivers in use behind the

SMOOTH OPERATOR: Edward Kritsky reaches out and touches the whole world. **ANTHONY PESCATORE** DAILY NEWS

old Iron Curtain than transmitters, due to cost and scarceness of replacement parts.

But the Russian rules are easier since the fall of Communism and the KGB. "It's now like looking through crystal-clear water," says Ed, a one-man bridge over a vast cultural gap. He has an advantage over other American hams because he speaks fluent Russian, and not all the Russian hams speak English well. "The language barrier is stronger than chains," he says.

Since the USSR's breakup, he's heard the sad story of violence from many hams in Azerbaijan, Moldavia and other places where the blasts of warfare can be heard in the distance. "In those zones of conflict, no phone can get through," says Ed. "But a ham operator can really reach out and touch it."

HE WAS THE FIRST person anywhere to tell the truth to the people of Kiev about what happened in 1986 at the nuclear power plant in nearby Chernobyl. "I asked did they know what's happening, they said no, I told them to get out," says Ed, who relayed to Kiev American news reports of the disaster.

Similarly, he enlightened Muscovites about last August's military coup. He was visiting Moscow at the time — and radioed his brother back in Brooklyn to learn the details, which he then passed on.

He has also helped get medicine shipped to Russia for sick children. He's passed on information about societies for the blind. Once he helped save an auto accident victim by arranging for a shipment of antibiotics to a tiny village near Moscow.

And he's given English lessons, explained how checking accounts work, spelled out what Social Security num-

bers are. "There are still wide gaps between our nations," he says, "not because of secrets but because there's no around to tell them. Some Russians are simply curious about what it's like to own a car, what life is like in New York."

He's been active in trying to get nations to pass more international ham agreements. Right now he's working to get permission for a third-party agreement. That's where a ham in the U.S., for example, may call an overseas ham who, in turn, phones a nearby relative of the American ham, and then puts the relative on the air to the U.S. by way of a radio phone patch.

"If that agreement is signed between the U.S. and the Soviet republics," he says, "it would be a most tremendous achievement."

Among other things, he says, it would facilitate coordinating emergency responses.

Even though he's talking to a former Communist dreadnought, there's never trouble. "The amateur airwaves have always been a place where gentlemen meet," says Ed the Red. "There is no intelligence gathering. Ham operators steer clear of controversy. "And the ham experience does not compare to domestic talk radio on the AM dial, where noisy discussions of politics and social issues prevail. That pretty much rules out verbal warfare, no matter how civilized.

"This is human to human contact," says Ed. "A way of sharing life, and lives."

(Gray Basnight produces "The Daily News Show" for WOR Radio.)