

RUSSIA'S 'REFUSENIKS': U.S. Scientists Take a Stand

U. S. scientific organizations continue efforts to free repressed foreign scientists

BY JANET RALOFF

In what it calls "an unprecedented move," the National Academy of Sciences has asked for permission for one or more U.S. observers to attend the impending trial of Anatoliy B. Shcharanskiy, a Soviet computer scientist accused of treason. In his Dec. 15 cable to Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, NAS President Philip Handler asked that the designated legal observers be allowed to "discuss the case with the Soviet attorney of Dr. Shcharanskiy and be present at the legal proceedings. After the trial, they will return to report their observations." He also noted that "future relations between the scientific communities of our two countries could well be affected by world opinion of the fairness of the trial and its outcome." Handler's cable went out one week after he spent a four-hour session with Mark Azbel, a friend of Shcharanskiy and a scientist who was finally granted permission to emigrate to Israel last July after five years of waiting as a "refusenik."

Shcharanskiy is also a refusenik, one of a growing number of Russian Jews who have requested permission to emigrate to Israel and been refused. Refusenik scientists are often dismissed from their jobs and refused access to research laboratories or permission to publish in Soviet journals. In order to continue science, many have organized "Sunday seminars" in their homes where colleagues can meet, discuss their research and science in general. Although theoretically given freedom-of-assembly, participants in the seminars have frequently alleged repeated harassment by Soviet police and the KGB. Shcharanskiy has served as press attaché and contact with the international scientific community for a Moscow Sunday-seminar group.

In what some U.S. observers believe to be a trumped-up charge, Shcharanskiy was arrested last March as an alleged secret agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. Although President Carter has publicly denied that charge, Shcharanskiy "has been denied contact with close friends and relatives. As far as is known, there has been no communication from him since his arrest," the NAS says, and he is believed in jail.

Handler cited as a precedent for his request the fact "that when Soviet citizens expressed concern for the fate of Angela

Davis, President Nixon personally authorized an invitation to fourteen Soviet scientists to attend her trial."

Last April the fifth anniversary of the first Sunday seminar was celebrated in a government-approved scientific meeting with international participation. Mark Mellman, director of the New York-based Committee of Concerned Scientists, said his organization was instrumental in planning the U.S. participation. (The CCS works to organize the scientific community to campaign against repression of foreign scientists, particularly in the Soviet Union.) Mark Azbel, who organized the international Sunday seminar for his Moscow group, attributes his sudden ability to emigrate to Israel to the notoriety and international visibility that the seminar received. He says it forced the Soviet government to jail him or free him—and they freed him.

NATURE reported last April that of all who participated in the first Sunday seminar, only one remains in Moscow. "The others, one by one, and largely due to pressure from their Western colleagues, have received their permission to leave." Aleksandr Voronel, the organizer of the early Sunday seminars, received permission to emigrate only six months after trying unsuccessfully in 1974 to organize an international meeting of the type Azbel eventually pulled off.

In December, Azbel, speaking before a small group at the headquarters of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, said that "top level scientists are the most prestigious and well-paid persons in the Soviet Union, with the exception of some politicians." As such, they are highly respected and valued by their government, he said, and their loss via emigration is therefore thwarted at all costs. Azbel, a physicist, said he personally knew of no physicist who tried to emigrate and was not made a refusenik. A major motivation for requesting the exit visa is alleged anti-Semitism in Russia.

Many refuseniks never join seminars, hoping that by not drawing attention to themselves they may be allowed to wait for change in their emigration status in peace. Those who join the seminars may gain the greatest chance of leaving, ultimately, Azbel said, but not before enduring years of harassment — such as midnight searches of their homes by police and KGB, frequent arrests, and public beatings. But by drawing attention to themselves through meetings with visiting foreign scientists at their Sunday seminars, some



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Azbel attributes his release to visibility.

have won the attention and support of influential foreign colleagues and groups. It is only the repeated letters to Soviet officials by these foreign supporters and constant invitations to refuseniks by international science meetings that keep many out of jail, Azbel said. The Soviet government has a hard time repressing well-known scientists, because of the publicity, and eventually permits some to emigrate, he said.

"There is one thing you can't achieve and that is to worsen the situation in the Soviet Union." Although you may not help a scientist, your attention cannot hurt him, Azbel said, and offered a checklist, of sorts, on what he thought could help the 100 or more refusenik scientists he left behind.

- Foreign scientists carry the same prestige in Soviet society as Soviet scientists, Azbel said, so write as scientists on behalf of your colleagues. And the collective voice of a group is more effective than a flood of individual letters.
- Avoid politics and be diplomatic. Phrase letters and requests so that the official who receives it can comply and save face. Write only about science, such as whom you want to attend a scientific meeting.
- Azbel claims Russian officials tend to be cynical and act in their own best interests. He therefore suggests that letters be addressed to specific individuals in such a way that they will be responsible for any action that may result in their not honoring the request. For example, Russians are particularly interested in scientific-exchange programs and suggesting that the addressee may jeopardize such programs often can carry enough weight to effect a response, he said.
- "In no case am I urging anyone to stop scientific contacts"; he said to threaten seriously, but to keep contacts open.

Let it appear that the Soviet situation is the worst, it is important to note that thousands are subjected to similar or worse fates in Eastern Europe and Latin America. For example, a background

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paper on the persecution of Argentinian scientists prepared by the AAAS's committee on scientific freedom and responsibility, describes cases of individuals who have been dismissed from their jobs and forbidden to practice science anywhere in the country; many have been arrested as terrorists (which may amount to criticizing government policies) or simply been abducted in broad daylight, never to be seen or heard from again by family or friends. There have also been accounts of research institutions that were suddenly closed — presumably because theoretical thought and scientific individualism are seen as characteristics capable of fostering leadership and subversion, the AAAS says.

The CSFR has developed a clearinghouse on persecuted foreign scientists, headed by Tom Johnston, which acts as a referral agency. "Upon receiving an inquiry or expression of concern about a particular scientist ... the AAAS human-rights coordinator collects and reviews additional information. ... If appropriate, the case is then referred to a clearinghouse contact," who is a representative of a professional scientific society affiliated with the AAAS, in the discipline of the persecuted scientist, the AAAS says. This contact "is requested to investigate further ... and if the claim has merit, to begin correspondence with government officials in the country in which the violation has occurred. ... In significant cases, the AAAS ... will also develop advocacy on behalf of the individual scientist."

Since its formation little more than a year ago, the clearinghouse has received more than 120 claims, most of which are now under investigation. Johnston says he feels the clearinghouse has been at least partially successful in the release and emigration of two individuals.

The NAS also has a committee on human rights which investigates such violations. It was responsible for prompting Handler's action on Shcharanskiy and has asked for the Czechoslovak Supreme Court to commute the sentences of two scientists as a result of what it considers to have been violations of their human rights. □

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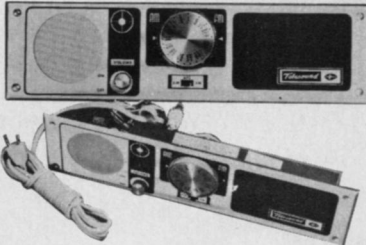
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