

COMMENT

Leaving home: Or how a government turns a peaceful citizen into a protester

Sergei M. Polikanov is a physicist. Until recently he worked at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research at Dubna in the USSR. Now he is at the Bohr Institute in Copenhagen and hoping to find a permanent position in the United States. He holds a one-way, no return exit visa from the Soviet Union.

He lost his homeland because he wanted to do some research. He studies nuclear physics, and the work he wanted to do concerned muons and fissile nuclei. Muons can be made to replace electrons in atoms, but they are 200 times as heavy as electrons. The difference is important in the dynamics of fission, and much can be learned about the way fission happens from the study of such substitutions. Work on such muonic atoms is particularly advanced at the CERN laboratory in Geneva. Polikanov wanted to go there to do some work.

The desire was not absurd. (If Polikanov

had been Chinese, he would have been on tomorrow morning's plane with a lavish deposit in a Swiss bank to support him.) Polikanov has a world-class reputation in nuclear physics. Last year the American Physical Society awarded him its Tom W. Bonner prize for his work in the field. He couldn't get here then to receive it, but he came for this year's Washington meeting of the society.

The Dubna institute has formal relations with CERN that provide for exchanges of personnel and equipment. The application had a context in which it could be placed, and approval came. One gets the impression that it was rather routine. There was one hitch: Polikanov would not be allowed to take his wife and daughter along.

"I could not live alone for several months," he says. So he decided not to go. But as a year or so passed, reports came in from Geneva of the work that was being done. More and more Polikanov felt he ought to be a part of it. "I felt a responsibility for it," he says.

So he began to put on pressure — that's his phrase, too. He wrote to the relevant officials. When their response seemed dilatory, he wrote a letter to Leonid Brezhnev. (How many people write letters to the President of the United States about the craziest projects and are never bothered

for it — only threats lead to investigations.) The response to Polikanov's letter writing was an invitation to Moscow where he was told he could have a one-way visa. As a gesture of compassion, they gave his wife and daughter the same.

Here is not a man who makes politics his profession. He led no demonstrations in Red Square, no unauthorized religious services in the streets. He is not a Jew. He is not a Zionist. He professes no patriotism that supersedes the patriotism of the country he was born in. He is a Russian. It is his country, his people, his language, and he has been divorced from it all by bureaucratic fiat because he wanted to take his wife and daughter to Geneva for a few months. The banality of it all makes it horrible.

Now he has become a political dissident. He gives advice about how to help Orlov and Scharansky. He warns against the total boycott of Soviet science that some activists propose. But for himself he seems to hope that one of the American institutions he has visited will offer him a position. Meanwhile, he is returning to Copenhagen. Denmark is a traditional receiver of refugees from Bolshevism ever since it took back the dowager tsarista. And at the Bohr Institute one can do nuclear physics.

—Dietrick E. Thomsen

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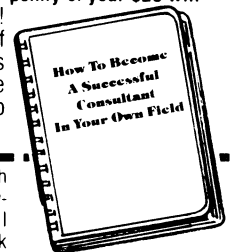
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