

No Letup in Soviet Repression

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Howard Witt and Jan Greenfield of the Arena Stage demonstrating on behalf of Valery Panov in front of the Soviet Embassy. Members of the company, participating in a cultural exchange to the U.S.S.R., returned with increased concern for the people of the Soviet Union, particularly Soviet Jewry.

Detente is just as illusory for citizens within the Soviet Union as it has been in international politics. Despite a few breakthroughs such as Andrei Arnalrik's release from prison to a three-year exile in Siberia, pressures against religious and ethnic groups and intellectuals continue.

New Jewish trials

It is suspected that diversion of world attention to the Middle East may be tempting Soviets to increase human rights violations. Particularly vulnerable are the Soviet Jews as international Jewry has rallied to the cause of Israel's survival. According to the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, "...in widely scattered cities, Jewish activists have disappeared and their whereabouts are unknown. Solomon Rozin, of Leningrad, did not return home after a visit to the local visa office.

On October 25, 32-year-old Leonid Zabelishensky of Sverdlovsk was reportedly taken to an undisclosed place after being arrested by local police. It was later learned that Zabelishensky was accused of 'parasitism' although his wife works and earns a substantial income." More trials for Jews are expected. Among them is that of Aleksandr Feldman.

"On November 8," according to the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, "the investigation of 26-year-old Aleksandr Feldman of Kiev was concluded. Feldman was to stand trial on November 19 on charges of 'malicious hooliganism.' In a dramatic 11th hour appeal, friends in Kiev and Moscow asked Soviet authorities to halt the trial and release the 'accused.' The signatories accuse the Soviet regime of, among other things, grave violation of the law in investigation of Feldman; they consider the charges as 'an illegal repressive measure.'

"On October 18 and 19 Kiev authorities conducted a search of Feldman's apartment, took him into custody and charged him with allegedly assaulting an as yet unidentified woman. Feldman, who has been trying for nearly two years to emigrate, was on his way to synagogue. According to the Ukrainian equivalent of the RSFSR Criminal Code, article No. 206, 'malicious hooliganism,' constituted 'the sane actions (as petty hooliganism) distinguished in their content by exceptional cynicism or special impudence, or connected with resisting a representative of authority or representative of the public fulfilling duties for protection of public order or other citizens who are restraining hooliganistic actions and, likewise, actions which are committed by a person previously convicted of hooliganism, and shall be punished by deprivation of freedom for a term of one to five years.' This may be considered a second offense, as Feldman had already served a 15-day detention for the same charge; the fact that Feldman may be considered a 'recidivist' adds severity to the case and has led friends to believe he could receive the maximum sentence of five years.

"The recent accusation of the Kiev newspaper (*Vecherni Kiev*) of erratic behavior means that Feldman is liable to be interned in a psychiatric institution; officials have already threatened to put him in the Pavlov psychiatric hospital near Kiev. Karapinkov, Feldman's interrogator, reportedly refused to receive any supporting materials from Aleksandr's brother, Leonid, or to hear witnesses attesting to Feldman's innocence. When relatives of other prisoners were allowed to bring warm clothes (October 25, 1973) Feldman's relatives were denied permission. Thus far, no attorney has agreed to defend Feldman; and his friends are desperately seeking one."

And now Sakharov's family

Renowned physicist Andrei Sakharov's wife Elena has been interrogated by the KGB and threatened with arrest. Mrs. Sakharov was active in dissident circles before her marriage and has helped send documents to the West, including the diary of Eduard Kuznetsov, accused in the 1970 Leningrad hijacking trial and sentenced to 15 years in a strict camp. Mrs. Sakharov was indirectly threatened with..., arrest after she refused to give evidence to the KGB. She was also told: "The dissidents prevent the democratization of this country. The authorities do not want repressions. Many of those who have left the country would like to return."

Sakharov has also informed the West of the psychiatric imprisonment of mathematician Yuri Shikhanovich. Shikhanovich, judged to show signs of "schizophrenia," had distributed anti-Soviet literature and studied a psychiatric report. U. S. psychiatrists have responded by sending a cable to Moscow court officials asking for an open trial.

U. S. actors' quick to respond

Actors from Arena Stage in Washington, D. C., have worked actively on behalf of repressed people in the Soviet Union since their return from a cultural exchange performance in Moscow and Leningrad of "Our Town" and "Inherit the Wind." Especially concerned about Soviet Jews, several of them have demonstrated at the Soviet Embassy to protest dancer Valerie Panov's treatment. (Panov, denied emigration, has also been barred from dancing. He has just completed a hunger strike in protest.) They have also visited U. S. Senator Henry Jackson and have held at least one public meeting.

At the Washington Hebrew Congregation on November 26 three actors and one director from the company spoke on their personal reflections.

"I was not only curious about Jews but about the Soviet Union," said Howard Witt. Mr. Witt described a Yom Kippur celebration with Moscow Jews. "These were men of importance, no longer allowed work, who want to bring up their children as Jews." As the visitors parted, "We, who don't understand what it is like, not to be free, sang 'Hava Nagila' through the streets of Moscow, followed by the KGB," said Mr. Witt. Diane Wiest, in describing the gathering, mentioned the prevailing spirit of thankfulness. "They are without anything except each other. Yet, they said, 'At least here we can gather together. Our prisoners cannot...' I am numb. I remember Ivan Denisovich's statement: 'How can anyone who is warm understand anyone who is cold?' I hope to stay cold to fight the fight."

Director of the acting company Alan Schneider, himself a Soviet Jew, gave good testimony to the importance of human contact. "What they most wanted was us contact with other Jews...I cannot forget their needs or their being there." Jan Greenfield spoke of his experience in terms of a personal awakening (see the following article) and interpersonal relations: "As conscious artists we must first be human." Jan's initial response to the trip was to want to go to Israel; now he wants to stay in the U. S. to do what he can there.

The ensuing discussion brought out two significant points. First was the information gap isolating the Soviet people—they knew little about harassment of the Jews or, for that matter, much else, including the Mideast War or even the wheat deal. "They know only what the government wants them to," one actor said. "They don't realize the problem. If they did, something could be done. But everything is in a vacuum." The fate of those who want to stay in the Soviet Union was also brought into question—pressure for immigration liberalization may bring reprisals in Russia for those Jews who regard it as their homeland and who want to maintain their religious traditions.

The final note of the discussion pointed out the inner, human essence of freedom, a theme underlying the recollection of the players and indeed of the whole human rights movement. It is no historical accident that Jews, Christians, artists, and intellectuals are most persecuted in the Soviet Union their acknowledgment of man as a spiritual being is in direct contradiction of Soviet ideology and practice—their existence and visibility is a threat to the regime. These people who are most persecuted are ironically much more free than their oppressors.