

## Scientific Freedom and Hunger Strikes

SUNDAY, June 10, 1973, marks a sad day indeed in the history of the Soviet Union. On that day seven scientists, all Soviet citizens, started a hunger strike designed to bring attention to the fate of scientists who, in the recent past, have attempted fruitlessly to obtain permission to emigrate to Israel. Whether this situation is any worse now than it was a few years ago cannot really be gauged but the fact that the Soviet Union is now relatively open to communication by telephone makes it easier for the rest of the world to hear of, and appreciate, the conditions in which the Soviet scientific profession works.

One of the latest sufferers of injustice is Professor Mark Azbel who was, until recently, head of the Department of Electron Theory of Metals at the Landau Institute of Theoretical Physics in Moscow. Professor Azbel's treatment at the hands of Soviet officialdom is so similar to treatment meted out in the past to other members of the Soviet scientific community that it is only the name that needs to be changed in accounts which *Nature* has published more than once in recent years. What is sad in the case of Professor Azbel, however, is the fact that he and his wife have been separated from their 12 year old son, a point brought out most poignantly in a letter from him dated June 8, addressed to "Scientists of the World":

"For 20 years I was engaged in science in the Soviet Union. I want to live the rest of my life in Israel. My 12 year old son is already there. He got his permission on March 27, and yet I am not allowed to leave the USSR. I am not accused, as many others are, of being involved in the secret activities, possibly because of the topics of about 100 of my papers which were published in the scientific magazines all over the world and which were submitted to these magazines from the well-known institute. I happen to be guilty just in being the doctor of science who must not be useful anywhere outside the USSR, and I am condemned to be separated from my son and to be forcibly detained in the USSR.

"I do not know who passed this sentence on me. I do not know for how long it will act. I cannot even appeal against it. I have not got any written sentence. It was told to me only orally and only by the irresponsible visa official, the only secret court of our time who announces the most essential judgement in the life of the Jew who wants to live in Israel—without any law, any lawyers, any defenders, any publicity and even without any written sentence. Will the world accept such a bible of inquisition customs, such absence of any control, such arbitrariness? Are the scientists and their societies so weak as to allow the scientific degree to become the stamp of state property? Will the lawyers and their international organizations be silent? I cannot be silent. I appeal! Scientists over the world help me! I can never get rid of my doctor's thesis. Does it mean I shall never see my son in Israel?"

Not only are the Soviet authorities apparently determined to bring to a halt the career of any scientist who

deigns to apply for permission to emigrate to Israel, but it seems that an element of the treatment is to disrupt families and to bring personal unhappiness into their lives. It is only two weeks since *Nature* (243, 313; 1973) highlighted the unfortunate case of Dr Evgeny Levich who was whisked away from his family and, as far as can be ascertained, is still at Tiksi in the Arctic, carrying out a period of military service. Now Professor Mark Azbel and his wife are faced with the agonizing decision of whether to leave their son in Israel or to attempt to reunite the family in the Soviet Union which, in all probability, would put an end to all further thoughts of emigration.

But what do the seven Soviet scientists hope to achieve with their hunger strike? By their own words they intend to prove that they belong to nobody but themselves. They state that the Soviet Union claims them as its own property and so "As a matter of principle and provided all other ways are exhausted, [we aim] to destroy this property rather than recognize that anybody is entitled to our souls and bodies". They will end their hunger strike, according to reports, if they are granted exit visas. But it must be asked if this hope is not fulfilled whether in fact there are no other ways of helping these men. The scientific community would suffer a grievous loss if they became martyrs for this cause. This is not to say that the importance of their campaign should be underestimated, but brave men who are prepared to die for their beliefs will do their cause more good if they stay alive to fight.

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### 100 Years Ago



As a supplement to the extract from James Forbes' "Oriental Memoirs," given by Dr. Gulliver in *NATURE* (vol. viii. page 103), the following incident, recorded by Capt. Johnson, deserves republication:—

"I was one of a party at Jeekarry, in the Bahar district; our tents were pitched in a large mango garden, and our horses were picqueted in the same garden at a little distance off. When we were at dinner, a Syce came to us complaining that some of the horses had broken loose in consequence of being frightened by monkeys (*i.e. Macacus Rhesus*) on the trees. . . As soon as dinner was over, I went out with my gun to drive them off, and I fired with small shot at one of them, which instantly ran down to the lowest branch of the tree, as if he were going to fly at me, stopped suddenly, and coolly put his paw to the part wounded, covered with blood, and held it out for me to see. I was so much hurt at the time that it has left an impression never to be effaced, and I have never since fired a gun at any of the tribe.

G. J. R.

from *Nature* 8, 163; June 26, 1873