A partial triumph

Vera Rich assesses the Moscow Seminar, which celebrates its fifth anniversary this month

THE illicit Moscow 'Sunday Seminar' for *refusnik* scientists was founded five years ago this month. In a remarkable development after such a lengthy period of harassment of its organisers and participants, the Soviet authorities have now informed Professor Mark Azbel, the current leader of the seminar, that he may hold a special anniversary meeting this week provided it is confined to matters of strictly scientific interest.

The first Sunday seminar for *refusnik* scientists—that is, Jewish scientists dismissed from their posts and deprived of all official means of pursuing their careers—took place in Moscow on 12 April 1972. The date is significant—1972 was the year of the 'education tax', by which any Jew wishing to emigrate to Israel was obliged to repay to the government the 'cost' of any higher education he may have received. And since such education is provided *gratis* by the State, the authorities could clearly fix its notional cost at any value they chose.

Scientists wishing to emigrate became liable to long waiting periods between applying for a visa and receiving permission to emigrate. They therefore began to form one of the most significant social groups within the growing class of *otkazniki* (the word which later became transformed in English to 'refusnik')—those not permitted to leave the country, yet deprived of their professional means of livelihood within it.

Moscow meeting

Against this background, a modest group of 17 scientists met in the Moscow flat of Dr Henrikh Sokolnik in April 1972. The venue was chosen because Dr Sokolnik is a chair-bound cripple. Their aim was to read papers of mutual interest and thus to keep up the interplay of ideas without which scientists cannot function professionally. Throughout 1972 the group functioned quietly without attracting the attention either of the Soviet authorities or of Western sympathisers. Even the weekly *Bulletin Jews in the USSR*, founded that year to publicise the plight of *refusniks* and Jewish prisoners of conscience, made no mention of the seminar, although it carried numerous appeals from scientists to their colleagues abroad, and news items about scientists suffering particular hardship (notably Dr Evgenii Levich, who in that year was

sent to a Siberian labour camp).

It was not until 1973 that the first information about the seminar began to reach the outside world. In that summer, when an International Conference on Magnetism was meeting in Moscow, several Western scientists, learning of the exclusion of the *refusniks* from the conference, made their way to the flat of Professor Aleksandr Voronel, where the seminar was then meeting, and took part in a lively and informative discussion. From this contact the idea arose of holding an International Session of the seminar the following summer.

The International Session was widely announced. In addition to Professor Voronel, two organising secretaries, Dr Norman Chigier of the University of Sheffield and Dr Edward Stern of the University of Washington, Seattle, were appointed. Papers were invited on an international basis, and more than 50 leading scientists, including seven Nobel prize-winners, lent their names, either as patrons or as would-be contributors. The preparations caused considerable disquiet to the Soviet authorities which, in the stress of the situation, made what can be seen in retrospect as a tactical mistake.

Had the seminar been permitted to take place, then coming as it did at the height of the scientific conference season (July) and virtually coinciding with President Nixon's visit to Washington, it might have merited at best a paragraph in the foreign press as a promising sign of a new 'thaw'. Instead, prospective Western visitors were denied entry visas, the proposed venue was put under KGB supervision, the Moscow organisers were arrested and taken to detention centres outside the city, and other would-be participants were kept under virtual house arrest. The 'Seminar-that-never-was' accordingly went into history as a major example of State interference in academic freedom, and the 'Voronel Sunday Seminar' became an important (if unofficial) item on the schedule of scientists visiting Moscow in the course of their professional duties. It is estimated that, to date, some 150–200 foreign visitors have attended the Seminar.

Remarkable survival

The survival of the seminar over five years is, under Soviet conditions, remarkable. Of all those who took part in the first meeting only one is

still in Moscow: Corresponding-Academician Veniamin Levich. The others, one by one, and largely due to pressure from their Western colleagues, have received their permission to leave. Professor Voronel himself received an exit visa some six months after the non-occurrence of the International Session, and his role as leader has been inherited by Dr Mark Azbel, with, in recent months, Dr Anatolii Shcharanskii acting as press attaché and contact with the international scientific community.

As the more 'senior' members of the group leave, there are always new *refusniks* to fill their places, and there seems little likelihood that the need for a seminar will disappear within the foreseeable future. Indeed, the seminar movement has proliferated: by last summer some ten additional seminars had been established dealing with specialised topics, including theoretical physics, computer science, radio-electronics, and biology; and one seminar, in Kiev, after being officially 'closed' by the KGB, began meeting in a public park. Organisers and participants from all groups have experienced constant harassment including police interrogation, confiscation of books and papers, and short-term arrests.

One reason for the Moscow Seminar's survival is undoubtedly the interest shown by many scientists abroad. For them, the existence of a clear-cut ethical issue is involved: the UN Declaration on Human Rights states unequivocally that everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own. But in practice a number of caveats arise as far as scientists are concerned which makes the right difficult to exercise. Access to classified information is one objection; another, which in the case of the Soviet Union gave rise to the notorious 'education tax', is the brain drain with all its attendant questions of how far a student, in accepting a place for higher education, may be deemed to have implicitly entered into a contractual obligation to work in the country which has financed him.

Scientists remain shocked, however, at the idea of their colleagues being prevented from functioning as scientists. The holding of seminars and discussions, access to new publications and correspondence and meetings with foreign colleagues, all constitute a major part of the scientist's basic activity. Even if the Soviet authorities see fit to dismiss from their professional posts scientists so 'disloyal' as to wish to emigrate, and to restrain that emigration in the interests of the State, it seems illogical then to prevent them exercising, even unofficially, that pro-

fession which makes them a State asset. The right of the refuseniks to hold seminars must appear unequivocal, even to those of their foreign colleagues who are disinclined to enter into long arguments against the Soviet government's pragmatic case for denying exit visas.

Contribution not great

But what, scientifically, is the value of these seminars? From the point of view of the progress of world science, it must be admitted that the Soviet contribution is not great. A handful of papers by refuseniks has been accepted by foreign journals, but it is significant that these are by the more mature members of the group—notably Veniamin Fain, Mark Azbel and Viktor and Irina Brailovskii. The papers are, presumably, the working-up of ideas which the authors had no time to develop during their active careers, and for young scientists, who have not yet developed such a back-log of topics, the prospect of publication abroad is probably somewhat bleak.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of the scientists themselves, attendance at the seminar is something more than a holding operation. Soviet science, aimed as it is at serving the national economy, can be extremely narrow, so that one hears of first degrees in such topics as light metal engineering for the civil aviation industry. Moreover, theoretically Soviet science must serve socialism, and every working scientist must, officially at least, formally confirm his political commitment.

In the Seminar all this is changed. Thrown out of their jobs, the refuseniks found a new freedom in their release from this tacit agreement to serve political ends. "We stopped mourning for our scientific interests, since, in truth, we had attained the ideal of scientific detachment", Voronel explains in his preface to the 'Proceedings' of the Seminar-that-never-was. At the very first meeting, Levich joked that "This reminds me of my youth. Back in a group of Jews again, and once again they talk nothing but science".

Over the years, this first flush of euphoria has somewhat faded, but the broadening of the participants' interests has not. Asked last week to comment on the achievements of the Seminar during its five years' existence, Professor Voronel remarked:

"The main difficulty of the seminar has been to combine the different interests of its participants, but it can also be an advantage because they become aware of different fields. This may be of great value to contemporary science, to have such an interdisciplinary forum."

He cited the case of Shepelev, who from a discussion of general principles of phase transitions developed a new approach to his own subject—the strength of rubber and polymers. He also spoke of Roginskii, originally a nuclear physicist, who during the course of the seminars became interested in solid state physics and, on receiving his visa, was able to take up a post at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, working in this new field.

This broadening of intellectual interests is, of course, considerably restricted by the lack of access to published literature, particularly from abroad. One project in particular, a sociological study for which surveys and questionnaires were distributed under conditions of great difficulty, would have had considerably greater intrinsic value had comparable figures, published during the past few years in the USA, been available for comparison. Foreign scientists have been invaluable as a source of information on the main trends of research abroad, as well as a profound source of moral support.

How much easier?

The fact that the authorities have given permission to hold the one meeting (although, strictly speaking, no such permission is required, since the Soviet constitution guarantees the right of assembly) will not necessarily mean that there will be no interference with the regular Sunday meetings. And, even if these can proceed without harassment, access to published literature will still be restricted to those few members who have retained their right of entry to academic libraries, and to the few hand-written copies of the primary journals available as *samizdat*. Experimental facilities will be lacking, and although the Russian term *nauka* covers the humanities and social sciences as well as the physical sciences, it seems unlikely that the authorities would look with favour on any further attempts to make sociological surveys; the data from the first such survey was confiscated last December.

Any attempts to hold another International Session, as opposed to welcoming visitors on an *ad hoc* basis, would doubtless still be interpreted as a 'foreign provocation', as it was in 1974. Furthermore, Anatolii Shcharanskii, the Seminar 'spokesman', is still in custody, facing the possibility of treason charges being brought against him; and within the past few months several members of the Seminar have been accused in *Izvestiya* of being agents of the CIA. Even if permission were now to be extended to the regular meetings of the Seminar, this would

Azbel (top) and Voronel: activists

be of little value if it were to be accompanied by harassment of individual participants on grounds other than their membership.

The granting of the permission is nonetheless of far wider significance than a grudging acquiescence in the holding of a one-off celebration. Just as, in the words of Professor John Ziman, the true value of the Seminar "is not the work they are doing but the fact that they are doing it", so too the significance of this permission is not that the Soviet authorities will permit one special meeting of the Seminar to be held, but the fact that they admit the Seminar exists at all. In 1974 foreign scientists wishing to attend the International Session were refused visas on the grounds that they had not been invited by a *bona fide* organisation. In December 1976, when the Seminar group was to hold a special symposium on Jewish life in the USSR, the leaders were arrested and their right to hold the symposium was emphatically denied. Throughout the past five years, the authorities have done their best to deny the existence of the Seminar, and proceedings against its members and activists have been brought on other counts, such as 'parasitism' (being without visible means of support) or 'slandering the State'. The granting of permission even for one meeting represents a real achievement, not least for science. □