

Vancouver boycott supports Plyushch

from Vera Rich

THE right of a scientist to travel abroad for professional purposes is one of the most vexed questions confronting campaigners for human rights in the USSR. Recently the greatest attention has been focused on those Jewish scientists who wish to leave the Soviet Union permanently and settle in Israel—a desire usually denied either on the grounds that the scientist concerned has allegedly had access to classified information, or else that he represents an asset to the State in terms of education and experience. (The fact that scientists who apply for a visa to Israel tend to be fairly rapidly dismissed from their posts does not entirely vitiate the latter argument—the authorities may not wish to make use of the services of these valuable personnel, but they do not wish their services made available elsewhere).

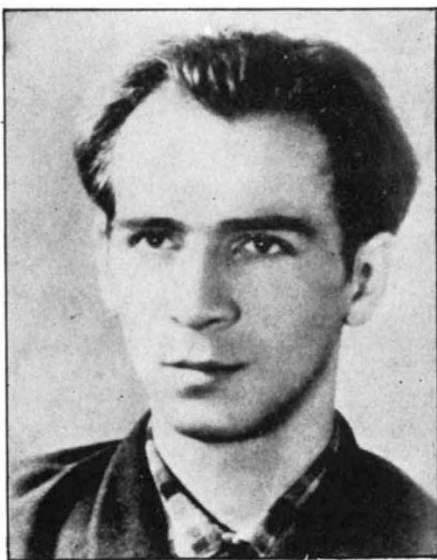
The case of scientists who wish for a temporary visa is far less defensible. These scientists simply wish to travel abroad to a conference, deliver their paper, and return home. There is no question of settling abroad; they wish merely to make a temporary visit. Yet all too frequently, invited scientists fail to arrive at conferences, and their places are filled by uninvited representatives of the Soviet Union, who have little or no reputation in the field concerned, and who insist on delivering papers which often have only a very peripheral connection with the subject of the conference.

This substitution of delegates can, however, possibly be turned to good account by those who wish to press for academic freedom for their Soviet colleagues. At the recent International Congress of Mathematicians in Vancouver, a number of participants decided to boycott the papers of such uninvited delegates as a protest against the persecution of a number of Soviet mathematicians, notably that of Leonid Plyushch, whose fate was also the subject of an appeal to the Congress by Dr Andrei Sakharov, the founder of the illegal "human rights" movement in the Soviet Union.

Plyushch, a mathematician and cybernetician, was formerly employed at the Cybernetics Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR, specialising in the computer simulation of biological and biochemical processes. In 1968, he was dismissed from his post as the result of a letter which he wrote to the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, protesting against the illegality of the trial of the writers Ginsberg and Galanskov. In 1969, he became a founder-member of the illegal "Initiative Group for the Defence of Human

Rights", founded by Dr Andrei Sakharov. In 1972, after almost four years without work, and a number of interrogations and harassments, Plyushch was arrested on January 17, 1972, under Article 62 of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR for 'anti-Soviet activities'. His arrest formed part of a general campaign against the *samizdat* journals *Chronicle of Current Events* and the *Ukrainian Herald*. In January 1973, he was sentenced *in absentia* to indefinite confinement in a special mental institution, suffering, it would appear, from that notable discovery of Drs Lunts, Morozov, *et al.*: "schizophrenia leading to ideas of reform making."

Since then he has been confined in the Dnepropetrovsk "special" psychiatric hospital, and an appeal dated



Plyushch: "at the border of death"

February 12, 1974, and signed by six leading intellectuals including Sakharov, which reached the West via the *Samizdat* network, speaks of the "appalling conditions of humiliation, persecution and physical suffering" in which he is held. Intensive "treatment" with haloperidol has caused a "sharp deterioration in his health, extreme exhaustion and continuous shivering, weakness, swellings, spasms, and loss of appetite." By that time he could no longer read, write letters or take advantage of the hour's exercise permitted to confinees. All requests by his wife for information on her husband's state of health, and treatment were refused.

Shortly after this appeal was drafted, an International Committee of Mathematicians for the Defence of Shikhanovich and Plyushch was set up in Paris. (Dr Yuriy Shikhanovich is a Moscow logician who was being held on charges similar to those against Plyushch.) After a number of requests to the Soviet embassy in Paris for news of the two mathematicians, the Committee was in-

formed that the diplomats were "inadequately informed" in these matters, but that the Soviet Union never used confinement in a mental hospital as a punitive measure, and that the "special" hospitals such as that in which Plyushch is confined were established so that scientists could receive especially good treatment and care. Later requests produced the 'information' that Plyushch was dismissed for negligence in his work and for having lost departmental documents. After which he made no attempt to find further work, but engaged in writing and circulating anti-Soviet material. During the judicial enquiry into these activities he was found to be suffering from schizophrenia and was still (March 25, 1974) in need of medical treatment. A reexamination of Shikhanovich "in order to consider the possibility of terminating his course of treatment" was scheduled for March, and in June, he was in fact released, apparently in response to the Committee's pressures.

But Plyushch remains in confinement, perhaps on account of his Ukrainian nationality. Ukrainian dissidents, with their stress on equal rights for minority nationalities (and in particular for their own 50-million-strong 'minority') are always viewed considerably more severely by the Moscow authorities, lest nationalism should lead to a revival of Ukrainian separatism. (The Ukrainian SSR, like the other Union republics, does, of course, possess on paper the right to secede from the Soviet Union.)

Whatever the reason for his continued confinement, the conditions in which he is held according to the appeal of last February, have brought him "to the border of death", and even if he survives there is a real danger of irreversible psychological and intellectual damage.

It is not surprising, therefore, that appeals should have been made to the Vancouver Congress, both from the Paris Committee and directly from Sakharov, to "pass a resolution in Plyushch's defence, and to take all possible measures to save him." What is new is the suggested means of protest and the boycotting of uninvited papers. A great deal may be said in favour of international academic exchange with the Soviet Union, as a means of fostering *detente* and of opening channels through which pressures can be exerted, when necessary, for the defence of academic freedom. However, the long-standing Soviet practice of sending substitutes to international conferences must inevitably tend to vitiate these advantages. The recent appeal on behalf of Leonid Plyushch, if the proposed boycott becomes a regular reaction, may put an end to the high-handed attitude of the Soviet authorities in denying visas to invited delegates. □