

AN OFFENSE AGAINST HUMANITY, NOT SCIENCE

On the morning of July 1, in Leningrad, Soviet KGB agents detained Ephraim Katchalski-Katzir. Dr. Katzir was in the Soviet Union as the guest of Academician Yu. A. Ovchinnikov, vice president of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences and director of the M. M. Shemyakin Institute of Bio-organic Chemistry. In Leningrad the preceding week, Dr. Katzir had chaired a round-table, "Biotechnology: State of the Art and Future Developments," at the meeting of the Federation of European Biochemical Societies.

Even though Dr. Katzir was a special guest of the Soviet Union, and even though he is a former president of Israel, the KGB agents took him into custody and questioned him and his wife for one-and-a-half hours about their contacts "with this refusnik and that one." *Refusniks*, of course, are Russian Jews who have applied to emigrate to Israel, been deprived of their jobs, and then been denied exit visas.

As international incidents go, this hindering of Dr. Katzir is a small thing. Even in Israel, we are told, the Soviets' interference with Dr. Katzir took a rather neglected back seat to the hurlyburly of campaigning for national elections. Still, the news did make headlines for a moment. And the news, when it reached us, created quite a stir in our offices, because of Dr. Katzir's prominence as an scientist, because of his prominence as an Israeli, and because he is a member of our scientific advisory board.

At first, we saw this interference with Dr. Katzir as a roadblock thrown by the Soviets in the path of international science. And, because many of the most prominent Jewish dissidents in the Soviet Union are scientists, we had begun to see the grim outlines of a Soviet effort to control

"technology transfer" by confining disaffected scientists and their knowledge to the motherland.

"Absolutely not," says Dr. Katzir.

The KGB acted against him because he was an Israeli trying to make contact with refusniks, a group the Soviets want to keep isolated. While he is bitter about what he calls "a crude act, a crass act, certainly for people who are accustomed to a free and democratic society," Dr. Katzir says his brief arrest had no connection with his role as a scientist. Indeed, Dr. Ovchinnikov apologized profusely when they met again in Boston the week after the Leningrad incident, Dr. Katzir says.

"We went to the U.S.S.R. as guests of the Russian Academy and were treated very cordially...absolutely all right," says Dr. Katzir. The Soviets appear to be genuinely interested in opening their European scientific contacts; they do not want to close down this new avenue of exchange between Russians and Israelis, about one hundred of whom attended the Leningrad meeting without any other untoward incidents.

(We should note, however, that an American professor of biology, Carleton Phillips of Hofstra University, reported being roused by KGB agents in his hotel room in Leningrad as he finished up a research-and-lecture tour on June 23.)

Whatever the KGB's motives, its actions were barbaric. We deplore the detention of this scientist or any scientist who, invited into any country for purposes of free exchange, offers no offense but the attempted exercise of what we persist in thinking a universal right of people peaceably to assemble. We hope our colleagues will join us.

—Douglas McCormick

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