

APR10-2009-020011

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the APR10 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

Andrei Sakharov Prize Talk: Supporting Repressed Scientists: Continuing Efforts

JOSEPH L. BIRMAN, City College and City University of New York

Some years ago, Max Perutz asked “By What Right Do We Scientists Invoke Human Rights?” My presentation will start with mentioning actions of the international community which relate to this question. Such action as the creation in 1919 of the International Research Council, and continuing on to the present with the UN sanctioned International Council of Scientific Unions [ICSU], and other Committees such as those formed by APS, CCS, NYAS, AAAS which give support to repressed scientists around the world now. My own work has attempted to combine my individual initiatives with work as a member and officer of these groups. Together with like minded colleagues who are deeply affected when colleagues are discharged from their positions, exiled, imprisoned and subject to brutal treatment, often after mock “trials”, we react. On visits in 1968 to conferences in Budapest, and then in 1969 to Moscow, Tallin and Leningrad I became personally and deeply touched by the lives of colleagues who were seriously constrained by living under dictatorships. I could move freely into and out of their countries, speak openly about my work or any other matter. They could not, under penalty of possibly serious punishment. Yet, I felt these people were like my extended family. If my grandparents had not left Eastern Europe for the USA in the late 1890s our situations could have been reversed. A little later in the 1970’s, “refusenik” and “dissident” scientists in the USSR needed support. Colleagues like Andrei Sakharov, Naum Meiman, Mark Azbel, Yakov Alpert, Yuri Orlov and others were being punished for exercising their rights under the UN sanctioned international protocols on “Universality of Science and Free Circulation of Scientists”. Their own governments [which signed these agreements] ignored the very protections they had supported. On frequent trips to the USSR during the 70s, and 80s I also seized the opportunity for “individual initiative” to help these colleagues. I asked for, and got, the opportunity to meet some high level Soviet administrators such as vice President Velikhov of the Academy of Sciences as well as Laboratory directors, and pressed the cases of individual scientists by name. This led to a memorable double existence. During the days I was an “official guest” of the USSR, while in the evening I would visit colleagues who were fired ; on weekends I participated in Refusenick “Sunday” Seminars in an apartment in Moscow. This all changed in 1991 with the end of communism in the USSR. Unfortunately various authorities in the new Russia still violate the UN protocols and scientists there need support even now. The need to continue both individual & group mode of support continues to the present, and now includes helping colleagues in China, Cuba, Iran, the USA [Wen Ho Lee case], and other locales around the world. Intervention for Liu Gang [imprisoned in Beijing], Professor Fang LiZhi, and others in China, the brothers Drs Allaei in Iran, was and is still necessary. In all these cases we must have reliable information. We publicize by direct contact with officials of the relevant country. And very important is that we press the U S government to intervene. Even the step of having a US official inquire about a repressed scientist makes a difference. Judge Brandeis of the U S Supreme Court is the attributed author of the saying that “Sunlight is the best disinfectant”. Sunlight on repression can help end it. When Andrei Sakharov first visited New York at the Academy of Sciences in 1988