

Soviets Turn Deaf Ear to Pleas for Levich

Scientists around the world have been pelting the Soviets with letters and telegrams in recent weeks in a renewed attempt to extricate renowned electrochemist Benjamin G. Levich from the professional exile he is suffering in his country.

Levich, a Jew who has been trying to get permission to emigrate to Israel since 1972, is the best known of the group of Soviet scientists called "refuseniks"—those who have been refused permission to emigrate.

The current flurry of publicity has been generated to pressure the Soviet Union to allow Levich to attend an international conference at Oxford University that has been arranged to honor his 60th birthday. The purpose of the conference, which will be attended by over 100 scientists from 13 countries, is threefold: to review progress in the field of physical chemistry and hydrodynamics; to honor Levich as a pioneer in this field; and to demonstrate solidarity for the beleaguered scientist.

A week before the conference, which was scheduled for 11–13 July, the American Chemical Society (ACS) and the Committee of Concerned Scientists held a press conference at the ACS headquarters (which is located next door to the Soviet Embassy)—a last-minute attempt to pressure the Soviets to let Levich out. In attendance were Nobel laureate Julius Axelrod and Robert Adelstein of the National Heart and Lung Institute—both prominent members of the committee.* Statements were also read from Nobel laureate Marshall Nirenberg and from Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Sciences. An unhappy letter from Levich to the birthday conference participants was also read, in which he speculated that the "evil forces" in his country were "awaiting the final solution of my problem in a natural way, taking into account my age" and the health of his wife Tanya, who recently suffered a heart attack. "Dear friends . . . do not get discouraged," he wrote. "It is the support of many of you that has resulted more than once in the salvation of human lives and freedoms."

Levich's two sons have been allowed to move to Israel in the course of his 5-year quest for permission to emigrate. Levich is not among the crowd of dissident scientists who are trying to change the system; his only offense has been that he wants to leave. The government has denied him permission on the grounds that he had access to classified information in the 1940's and also because they claim he is indebted to his mother country who educated him. However, he has been stripped of all his professional posts and

ostracized from the official scientific community. (The scientists at the press conference passed around photocopies of a published scientific article where Levich's name had been crudely whited out, leaving a gap wherever it had appeared.)

The Levich press conference was yet another of many signs of the significant shift that has occurred over the past couple of years in the approach American scientific societies, including the Academy, have taken towards the plight of beleaguered colleagues in other countries. Only last year (*Science*, 16 January 1976) Levich figured in a flare-up between the Academy and the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) over the value of public gestures, as opposed to discrete private intercessions, in behalf of politically oppressed scientists. At that time Handler contended that behind-the-scenes pressure was more appropriate and expressed fear that public actions could jeopardize delicate private communications.

Now, however, the assumption prevails, bolstered by the enthusiastic response of oppressed scientists, that governments are likely to react favorably to the more activist approach. Scientific societies are moving away from their conservative, purist stance, adopting instead the attitude that active support of freedom of enquiry around the world is very much a proper concern. FAS director Jeremy Stone attributes this shift not so much to a dramatic change in attitudes, but to a slight shift in the balance between conservative and activist forces. In the past, he says, a society was reluctant to take a stand for fear of protests from conservatives; now, it is confronted with even louder yells from the activists if it *doesn't* take a stand.

If current trends continue, American scientists may be looking for new

ways to express their feelings, individually as well as collectively. Adelstein and Axelrod, at the press conference, took a few whacks at Soviet-American scientific meetings. Axelrod said that although he would be happy to collaborate with "any rank and file lab worker" in the Soviet Union, he was not accepting any invitations by the Soviets to participate in scientific meetings, which he regarded as a "facade," composed of committee meetings and toasts of friendship. Adelstein said the meetings are generally attended on the Soviet side by high-echelon types out of touch with day-to-day operations, whereas the United States sends working scientists; all of which results in a predominantly easterly flow of information. He said he hoped American scientists in official delegations to the Soviet Union would take time out to cultivate private contacts and attend the Moscow Seminars—unofficial meetings organized by Levich and other refuseniks.

All the agitation on Levich's behalf has so far been futile. But concerned scientists are at least fairly well convinced now that raising their voices will not harm their cause.—C.H.



*The Committee of Concerned Scientists, based in New York City, is an organization of about 4000 American scientists concerned with protecting human and scientific rights of scientists around the world. It was organized in 1972, around the time the Soviets thought up the "education tax" to prevent scientists from leaving the country unless they repaid the state for their education. Cochairman of the committee are Robert S. Adelstein and Harvard physicist Peter S. Pershan.