

Yelena Bonner Tells of Medical Abuse of Her Husband

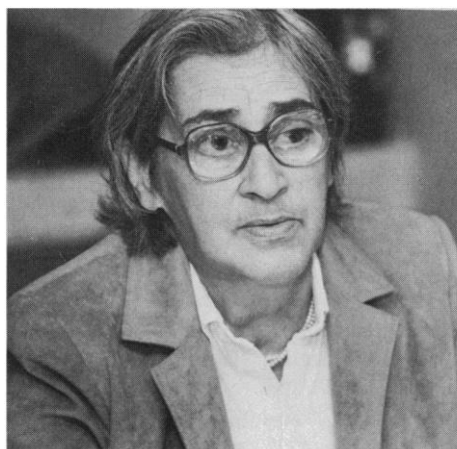
Yelena Bonner, the wife of physicist Andrei Sakharov, visited Washington at the end of April to press the cause of human rights in the Soviet Union. She spoke at the AAAS to a group of representatives from human rights groups and scientific societies and showed some film clips of Sakharov taken by the Russians that vividly convey his helplessness. She also attended the annual meeting of the National Academy of Sciences, whose members gave her a standing ovation.

Bonner, 62, is recovering from sextuple coronary bypass surgery. She looked well (she has quit her heavy smoking habit) and seemed in good spirits.

Speaking through an interpreter at the AAAS gathering, she stressed that nothing but misinformation is being sent out of Gorki, where she and her husband have lived for the past 6 years. Bonner had been allowed to make trips to Moscow until her trial in the summer of 1984, but has since not been allowed to leave the city. She finally gained permission in January to fly to Boston for surgery. For the past 2 years, she said, she and her husband have been "totally isolated from the world," without a telephone, forbidden from using public telephones and from talking to the citizens of Gorki. Bonner said she was in almost total isolation during the 10 months Sakharov was hospitalized as a result of a hunger strike.

She then showed some films that were made by the Russians to demonstrate that Sakharov is in good shape. Although made for external consumption (they have not been shown in the U.S.S.R.), they were very crude and demonstrated that Soviet disrespect for medical ethics is not confined to psychiatry. All were made without the subject's knowledge. One film showed Bonner sitting on a bench with her lawyer, used as evidence that Bonner "often met with friends." (Bonner said she did not realize until after watching the film several times that the lawyer was aware of the camera.) Another film showed Sakharov "resting." In fact he is sitting with his physician, who is shuffling foreign magazines and ostentatiously making the covers visible to the camera. Bonner said that was for the purpose of establishing that Sakharov was well at a time when he was in fact on a hunger strike. Another film showed a gaunt and

apparently hairless Sakharov hungrily eating in his hospital bed. In this scene, the camera pans in on a wall calender in an apparent attempt to prove the footage was taken in 1985 during his supposed hunger strike when in fact it was 1984. Another showed a female technician prodding his naked torso during a medical exam. Bonner was clearly upset over the violations of the man's dignity and went on to relate how he was humiliated by what the Russians called "our female brigade" who tied him down on the bed for force-feeding. She quoted medical officials as telling Sakharov: "we won't allow you to die but we will make a cripple of you."



Yelena Bonner. During Washington visit, Sakharov's wife spoke for human rights.

When Sakharov came home from his hospital stay he told Bonner, "my physicians are contemporary Dr. Mengeles."

Bonner, who plans to return in time for her husband's 65th birthday on 21 May, said she was "afraid we will find ourselves in conditions of total isolation." Sakharov, she said, is very worried that false statements about "social questions" will be attributed to him and relayed his request that no information be believed that has not been confirmed by herself or by her son-in-law, Efrem Yankelevich, who lives in Newton, Massachusetts.

Bonner expects that the exile will be continued indefinitely. Commenting on reports that Sakharov might be given his freedom in a spy exchange, Bonner said she thought that the rumor of an 18 May exchange had been planted to forestall widespread celebration of Sakharov's birthday.

In response to questions, Bonner said that it would be "very desirable" to have human rights considerations built into any exchange agreement with the Russians. But she warned that any discussions that are not well publicized "will go directly to the garbage can." ■ **CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

NIH Plans Probe on Test of Altered Virus

The National Institutes of Health will investigate whether federally funded researchers in Texas violated agency guidelines while developing a swine vaccine against pseudorabies. NIH plans to form an eight-member committee of in-house scientists to look into the matter, according to William Gartland, director of NIH's office of recombinant DNA activities.

The vaccine was commercially licensed in January by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Pseudorabies causes serious economic losses for many pig farmers, especially in the Midwest.

At issue is whether the researchers had proper authorization before they conducted a field test of the vaccine, which is made from a modified live virus. The dispute over the test underscores the confusion among researchers and among federal agencies over the regulation of experiments that involve the deliberate release into the environment of genetically engineered organisms.

At a congressional hearing on 29 April, members of the House science and technology oversight subcommittee contended that the researchers should have obtained permission from their schools' institutional biosafety committees before the field test of the genetically altered virus was performed. The biosafety committee at Texas A&M University said in a letter dated 25 April to NIH that the test should have been regarded as a deliberate release experiment by faculty member Stewart McConnell, who tested the vaccine.

The test was conducted in 1984, but only recently has garnered wide publicity. The experiment involved the inoculation of 1400 pigs on a farm in Lometa, Texas, to control an outbreak of pseudorabies.

Saul Kit of Baylor College of Medicine, who developed the vaccine and supplied it to McConnell for testing, testified that the field test was not a deliberate release experiment involving a recombinant DNA organism. The vaccine virus was modified by the deletion of gene and does not contain any foreign genetic material, so it is not a recombinant DNA organism, he says. The altered virus cannot replicate as a result of the gene deletion and the virus is not excreted by inoculated animals, Kit said in an interview.

Kit says that under USDA regulations the field test was proper. His contention is supported by USDA official George Shibley, who recently said that testing the vaccine in animals does not constitute an environmental release of the organism. Other officials at USDA and other agencies either