

letters

Zehe's scientific character

On 4 November last year, we learned from a short note in a newspaper that Alfred Zehe, a scientist from the German Democratic Republic, had been arrested the previous day on charges of espionage while in Boston attending the 30th annual symposium of the American Vacuum Society.

Due to the seriousness of the charge, the circumstances of the arrest and the fact that he is a respectable member of the scientific community, the Mexican Physical Society decided, at the closing ceremony of its Annual Physics Conference, to give the following public testimony about Zehe's scientific character.

Alfred Zehe was awarded the National Prize of Science and Technology 1973 from the GDR; he was a visiting professor at the physics department of the Instituto de Ciencias at the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, in Mexico, from 1976 to 1980 and, since then, an exchange scholar for a period of four months every year. He is a professor of experimental physics at the Technical University of Dresden. He has over 190 scientific publications in the field of solid-state physics, which have earned him an international reputation. In Mexico, he has made a notable contribution to teaching, research and, most important of all, helping to develop the area of experimental physics at the UAP.

He participated very actively in building the undergraduate program for physics and in establishing several research projects at the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa. Also, he was one of the initiators of the graduate program at Puebla and helped to put it on a firm basis. Eleven theses were written under his advisement during these years. For this work and his scientific contributions, the University awarded him a doctorate *honoris causa* in 1980.

During the past five years, Zehe has presented more than 40 contributions at the annual meetings of the Mexican Physical Society. During the same period he has published 23 papers in scientific journals, five of them in the *Revista Mexicana de Física*, and the rest in American (4), Dutch (2), English

(4), German (7) and Soviet (1) journals.

His prolific academic work in our country, where a scientific tradition is beginning to grow, is something our physics community deeply appreciates and respects.

The Mexican Physical Society pleads, in the best interest of international collaboration and communication, for Zehe to get a fair trial and for his case not be used to cast a veil of suspicion upon those engaged in multinational cooperation. Furthermore, it is utterly important that Zehe's case should not be used to thwart the freedom of communication that is essential for a healthy scientific activity.

RAMÓN PERALTA-FABI

President

3/84

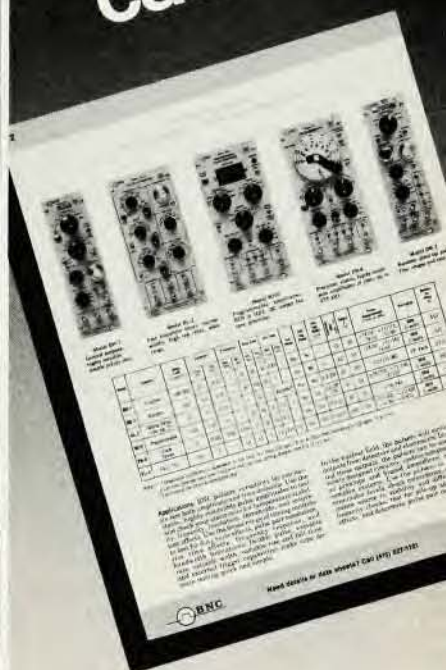
Mexican Physical Society

The case against Zehe proceeds at a snail's pace in US District Court in Boston. Since pleading innocent to charges of espionage last November, he appeared before a Federal magistrate in March to seek bail, which was denied as it customarily is when the maximum penalty is the sentence of death. While US attorneys and Zehe's lawyers are preparing their cases, no trial date has been set. The government views Zehe's actions to obtain classified scientific information as "a grand deception," says US Attorney Robert Muller. "We intend to prosecute to the hilt."

For their part, several Mexican physicists, including Peralta-Fabi (author of the letter above), interviewed by telephone, express shock at Zehe's arrest. "There is no evidence that Zehe engaged in politics in Mexico," says Peralta-Fabi. "If he did, he certainly was able to cover his tracks well." Another physicist observes that Zehe "is an asset to Mexican physics. He contributed to a better climate for research and teaching at a time when scientific education is dismal." A recent study by the National Association of Universities and the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico found that only 5% of university professors are full-time and only 15% have graduate degrees. To make matters worse, as Mexico evolves from an agrarian, impoverished society to an urban, industrialized country, student enrollment at universities has grown dramatically. In the past ten years, enrollments have jumped 137%—from 355 000 students in 1973 to some 840 000 last year—though physics has been one of the slowest-growing studies. —IG

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