

A meeting with Sakharov

Herman Feshbach



It was, to put it mildly, a memorable visit. I had first interacted directly with Andrei Sakharov more than a dozen years ago when Jerome Wiesner asked me to send Sakharov and his family a personal invitation to visit the United States as my guests. Since that time I had been in contact with him in one way or another but I had never met him face to face. I had seen Elena Bonner, his wife, several times and was and am friendly with her children Tanya Yankelevich and Alexi Semenov and Tanya's husband Efrem.

When Sakharov returned to Moscow from Gorky late in December, I agreed to join a group of college presidents who were planning to visit him late in January. The invitation came from Robert Arsenault, another Sakharov family friend. The group, led by Edmond Volpe, president of the College of Staten Island, consisted of Alice Chandler (State University of New York at New Paltz), David Fraser (Swarthmore College), Alice Ichman (Sarah Lawrence College), Larry Jackson (Lander College), Olen C. Robison (Middlebury College) and Sheila Kaplan (University of Wisconsin, Parkside).

I met the group in Moscow the evening of 24 January and proceeded with them to the Sakharov apartment for dinner. It was quite an emotional event for me as Andrei Dmitrevich and Elena greeted me with warm hugs. In spite of the many indignities he suffered in Gorky, Sakharov looks well, and is vigorously pursuing human rights issues as well as recent developments in particle physics and cosmology.

Our group spent the next morning visiting with Alexander Yaffe, a refugee then on the 18th day of a hunger strike undertaken to force the government to let his son, Dmitri, leave the Soviet Union. That afternoon, 25 January, the group met with Sakharov for



Dinner in Moscow. From left are Herman Feshbach, Elena Bonner, Andrei Sakharov and Alexi Semenov. (Photo © Robert Arsenault.)

three hours, during which he responded to our questions. In the evening I had dinner with the Sakharovs; Semenov, who had at the last minute been allowed to accompany the group; and Arsenault. After dinner (Elena prepared a delicious borscht), Sakharov and I talked physics, mostly string theory and Kaluza-Klein models. Sakharov was completely aware of the difficulties of these theories and was looking forward to a set of seminars at the Soviet Academy of Sciences on these topics. Alexi acted as translator.

The next day, 26 January, Sakharov, Arsenault, Semenov and I met in my hotel, where Sakharov composed a statement on human rights. As we left, we encountered a chambermaid, who recognized Sakharov. She gasped, hugged herself, reached for Sakharov's hand and kissed it. It was a very moving experience for me. Bear in mind the slanderous attacks on Sakharov made by the Soviet media. Arsenault and I rushed off to the airport to catch a flight to Vienna, where the next day I read Sakharov's statement

(see box on page 9) to a press conference at the meeting on implementation of the Helsinki Accords.

The following summary of Sakharov's comments on the afternoon of 26 January is based on my notes:

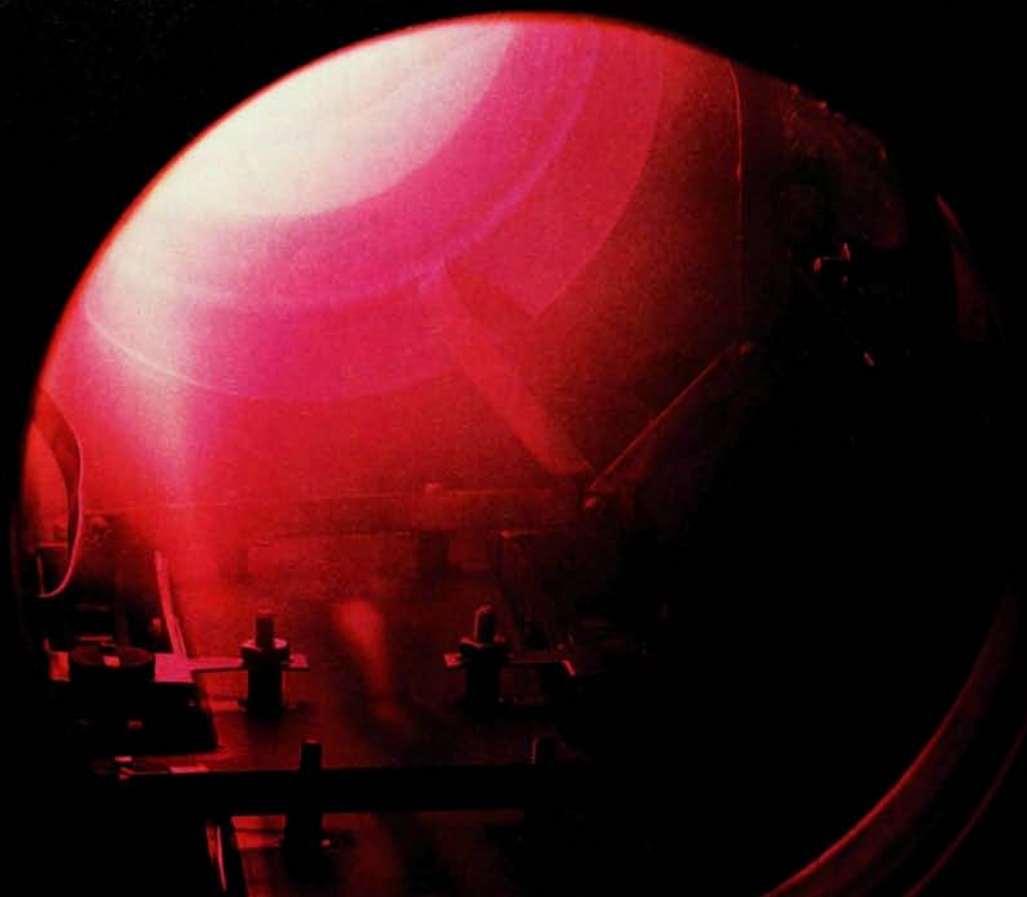
► He placed a strong emphasis on the release of prisoners of conscience, including not only dissidents but also Crimean Tatars, Germans, Jews and Pentecostals. Sakharov knows the names and sentences of about 700 such individuals. The total probably is on the order of 2000.

► In the Soviet Union and throughout the world one should press for freedom of thought and conscience, religious freedom, freedom to distribute information, freedom to travel and freedom to choose one's country of residence.

► The move toward greater openness in Soviet society has surprised everyone. How real the change is, Sakharov cannot say. He hopes for a general amnesty for prisoners of conscience. There is some negative evidence, as exemplified by the case of Anatoly Marchenko, who died during a recent

Herman Feshbach is a nuclear theorist who was chairman of the MIT physics department for ten years.

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hunger strike, and by the new, more restrictive Soviet emigration regulations, which are in violation of the Helsinki Accords.

► What do the Soviet leaders hope to gain from openness? Liberalization of Soviet society is essential for scientific and technical progress. A closed society is dangerously unstable. However, one should realize that not all Soviet citizens want democratization.

► In November, during the first set of meetings in Vienna on the Helsinki Accords, the Soviets proposed a meeting on human rights in Moscow. The Soviet government should be urged to first release prisoners of conscience, especially those involved in monitoring the Helsinki Accords.

► Exchanges, especially scientific exchanges, are important. These should be increased in every possible way. But the scientists involved in exchanges should bear in mind the first two issues listed above. These should be raised at every opportunity. Both Soviet and American scientific participants should insist that invitations be issued solely on scientific merit.

► There is a strong connection between arms control and openness. It is difficult to develop the trust necessary for the former when a society is closed or when it violates the Helsinki Accords.

► The important issues in arms control are not technical. Nontechnical political issues dominate.

► Sakharov is against "packaging" in arms control—in particular, the Soviet coupling of SDI with other features of

the Reykjavik proposals. This coupling is wrong because SDI will not work with sufficient reliability. There are many technical unknowns. Moreover, cruise missiles and submarines are completely independent from the space-based SDI. It would be better to obtain agreement in other areas, particularly to eliminate offensive weapons and thus expedite agreement on defense.

► One of the college presidents asked Sakharov how to teach our students about human rights. Sakharov replied that there wasn't too much he could say since he doesn't know the American educational system. However, such education should be based on the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Principles should be discussed together with analyses of concrete situations in different parts of the world.

Recent announcements in the press and private information indicate that the liberalization of Soviet society is continuing. Very much remains to be done. But I hope that the freedoms for which Bonner and Sakharov have fought so heroically will become a part of the Soviet way of life in the not too distant future.

Epilogue. Dmitri Yaffe did get his emigration visa. Several of the prisoners of conscience listed by Sakharov in his Vienna statement have been released. When I went to Moscow I was asked to inquire of Sakharov if he had been invited to attend the Moscow arms control conference to be held 14-16 February. He had not been invited yet, but shortly after my return to the US, I learned that he had been invited and would speak as well. □

Sakharov on human rights goals

I believe the most immediate goal is the release of prisoners of conscience in the USSR and in the whole world. The release of prisoners of conscience in the USSR would demonstrate that the process of liberalization of society is real, genuine. We know of about 700 prisoners of conscience by name and sentence; in reality there are somewhat more, possibly double or triple that number if one includes those who were put into psychiatric hospitals and sentenced under trumped-up criminal charges. It is necessary to strive for the release of all of them.

The other important task is ensuring the right of free choice of one's country of residence, of emigration and of return, and of travel. The restriction of these rights to the cases of the reunification of families—which is an important problem in itself—contradicts international agreements, including the Helsinki Accords.

I would like to mention a few names. These are the people who are suffering for

the help they gave to others, for their striving for justice, for openness: the members of the Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights, the editors and distributors of the magazine *Chronicle of Current Events* and the bulletin *News from the USSR*, the members of the Helsinki Groups and associated committees, members of SMOT—the Free Interprofessional Association of Workers. They are in prisons, camps, psychiatric hospitals, in exile, deprived of family life and work in their professions. Here are the names of some of them: Altunyan, Velikanova, Kovalev, Khodorovich, Grigoriants, Smirnov, Shikhanovich, Koryagin, Podrabinek, Kostava, Bakhmin, Gershuni, Niklus, Nekipelov, Yakunin, Petkus, Bolonkin—and many, many others. Our common responsibility is to care about their fate, to strive for their freedom.

We must honor the memory of Anatoly Marchenko, who gave his life for the principle of justice.

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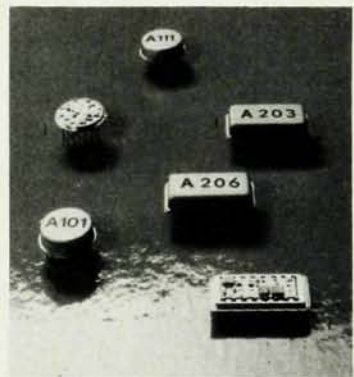
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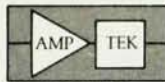
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