

US VISAS: STUMBLING BLOCS FOR POLISH PHYSICISTS

Eastern Europe is undergoing rapid changes. Our country, Poland, is leading the way. The American Administration declares full support and sympathy for our reforms. Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa was invited to address a joint session of the US Congress. One hears a lot about new links, new exchange programs and closer cooperation between the United States and Poland.

And yet...

We are a group of physicists working closely with colleagues from several research universities and laboratories in the US. In some cases this cooperation has lasted more than 15 years. Some of us started as postdocs and over the years and numerous visits became visiting or adjunct professors at various American universities. We are involved in basic research. All results of our joint research are published in international journals, mostly American or British. Some of us have been members of The American Physical Society for more than ten years. We believe that we are contributing to the advancement of physics within the international physics community, almost as a part of the "American team." Of course, the benefits are mutual, and Polish physics would not be able to survive the present deep economical crisis in its relatively good shape without its international contacts.

The stereotype of the Communist country granting freedom of travel only to faithful party members never really applied to Poland. It is now completely wrong. In fact, just like our American colleagues, we now keep our passports at home. However, the analogy ends there. Unlike Americans, we need foreign visas to enter most Western countries. American visas are the most troublesome and frustrating to obtain. We are not talking about tourist visas. We are talking about J1 visas for long scientific visits and B1 visas for short visits. While refusals are rare (though not unheard of), notoriously, the procedure takes a very long time,

typically from six weeks to several months. The expectation time does not depend on the number of previous visits. Stated departure dates are routinely ignored. Several times people have been unable to participate in important international conferences because a visa was granted after the meeting ended. Typically visas come on the eve before departure, testing our nerves and making the preparations for the trip overseas especially difficult. Some of us who are more cautious decide against the use of discount airfares for travel across the ocean and within the US, since they require advance purchase and punish no-shows. So the visa problems cost money, either our own or that of our American sponsors.

It will come as a surprise to most readers when we say that American business visas were a lot easier to get five or ten years ago, when Poland could have been treated with much greater suspicion than now. We all remember the good old days when the waiting period was exactly three weeks and the only catch could be that some legal holiday, either Polish or American, fell on the day we expected the visa to arrive.

We would like the American physics community to know that there is a strange contradiction between the words of the present American Administration and its deeds in handling visa applications for Polish scientists invited to visit American universities.

We do not expect preferential treatment. We expect the consistency, fairness and efficiency the US is famous for.

Hoping for the most fruitful continuation of our collaboration,

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