

Andrei Sakharov: A Righteous Gentile

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Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov is one of the moral giants of our age. Scientist, Nobel laureate, human-rights crusader, and, since 1980, an internal exile in his own country, Sakharov epitomizes the grandeur and indomitability of the human spirit. The next few months of intensified superpower diplomacy may determine his fate.

Once among the most privileged of Soviet citizens, Sakharov enjoyed all the prerequisites accorded the scientific elite. His material well-being and security were assured, his status unquestioned. Yet he abandoned it all to pursue higher goals: world peace, human rights, an end to internal repression. And he has paid a heavy price.

In 1974, while an exchange teacher in the USSR, I had a revealing conversation with a Soviet colleague.

"Sakharov is crazy and should be forcibly placed in a psychiatric hospital," my colleague asserted.

"But why?" I protested. "He is a responsible and decent man."

"Listen," my colleague retorted, "of course he's crazy. After all, he must have known that to challenge the state would land him in lots of trouble, probably force his dismissal from work and place him in prison. Therefore, you see, he's crazy because anyone who would knowingly embark on such a course couldn't possibly be sane."

In 1977 Sakharov's stepdaughter and her family emigrated to the United States. His wife, Elena Bonner, was able to accompany them as far as Rome. Ms. Bonner's devotion to her husband and to their joint work in behalf of human rights and world peace impelled her to leave her daughter, son-in-law, grandchildren and mother in Italy and to return to an unimaginably difficult life in the Soviet Union. Those of us then in Rome working on migration were tremendously moved by Ms. Bonner's seemingly limitless courage and strength.

Since 1980, Sakharov and Elena Bonner have

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been forced to live in exile in Gorky, a city closed to foreigners. There, cut off from family, friends and colleagues, under constant surveillance, denied even necessary medical attention, they are prisoners in everything but name.

This year Elena Bonner was permitted to travel to the West for medical care and a family reunion. In May she attended the massive Solidarity Sunday for Soviet Jewry in New York, when 300,000 people of all faiths welcomed Anatoly Shcharansky to freedom. Seated alone far from the speaker's platform, she listened intently to Shcharansky's powerful words. What a poignant scene! Shcharansky, the former prisoner of conscience, still savoring the first breaths of freedom; Bonner savoring her last. Shortly after the rally, Elena Bonner said goodbye to her family and to freedom and returned to her husband in Gorky.

Jews owe Andrei Sakharov a special debt. Not only has he fought indefatigably for peace and human rights, but he has been outspoken on behalf of Soviet Jewish emigration, Jewish prisoners of conscience, and a safe and secure Israel.

As early as 1970, Sakharov monitored the trial of the nine Jews and two non-Jews who had sought to divert a plane from Leningrad to Sweden, an incident that captured the world's attention and dramatized the plight of those seeking to leave the USSR. The next year, together with the other two members of the Committee on Human Rights, he called on the Kremlin leadership "to end the persecution of repatriates (Soviet Jews seeking to leave for Israel) and to stop violating the right to leave the country."

In September 1973 Sakharov sent a letter to the U.S. Congress supporting the withholding of most-favored-nation trade status until Soviet citizens were given the right to emigrate. "In our country there are tens of thousands of citizens...who wish to emigrate and who, with endless difficulties and humiliations, for years and years on end have been struggling to obtain this right." The next year both houses of Congress overwhelmingly passed the historic Jackson-Vanik Amendment linking U.S. trade policy with Communist countries' policy on emigration.

In October 1973, two terrorists seized Soviet Jewish hostages in Austria and demanded the closing of the Schoenau camp, the transit site for Soviet Jews proceeding to Israel. Chancellor Kreisky acceded to the demand, provoking outrage from Andrei Sakharov. "It is extremely painful for us to hear that two terrorists could blackmail whole nations on whom we placed our hope," Sakharov wrote. "That is a dreadful thing not only for our Jewish emigrants, but for all men who oppose bondage and terror."

Shortly thereafter, the Yom Kippur War broke out. Reuters reported that on October 21 two guerrillas claiming to belong to Black September

entered Sakharov's Moscow flat, cut his telephone wires and threatened him with reprisals if he did not remain "silent on the Arab-Israeli war and cease active support for Israel."

In 1975, while the UN was considering the infamous "Zionism is Racism" resolution, Sakharov warned the world body against sanctioning anti-Semitism. "If this resolution is adopted," he stated, "it can only contribute to anti-Semitic tendencies in many countries, by giving them the appearance of international legality. No less important is that this resolution indirectly denies the lawfulness of the existence of the state of Israel and thereby contradicts the spirit and letter of the most important UN decisions on this question."

Through the years, Sakharov has continued to speak out for the right of emigration and Jewish culture and against the persecution of Jewish activists, including his friend Anatoly Shcharansky. Indeed, in an interview with the Jerusalem Post shortly after arriving in Israel, Shcharansky referred to Sakharov as "the conscience of the Soviet Union." And the Knesset, the Weizman Institute and other leading Israeli institutions have honored Sakharov.

As the United States and the Soviet Union enter a new round of high-level bilateral diplomacy, the Jewish community and its friends are vigorously mobilizing to press demands for increased Jewish emigration and an end to repression of Jews. Never in recent memory has the situation of Soviet Jews been worse. At the same time, there is an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate support for Andrei Sakharov and Elena Bonner.

Some have argued that to extend overt Jewish support to the beleaguered couple might only complicate their situation. After all, Sakharov is not Jewish and his wife is half-Jewish, half-Armenian. Could not Jewish support hurt them in the Kremlin's eyes? Frankly, it is hard to imagine their situation being any more difficult than it already is. But more appeals to public officials and international bodies can only strengthen the worldwide campaign on the Sakharovs' behalf.

Still others contend that it would be inappropriate to "mix" the Sakharov case with that of Soviet Jewry. According to this view, Soviet Jewry is a unique issue that must not be confused with human-rights questions. Soviet Jews are not seeking the liberalization of the Soviet state, only their right to repatriation and family reunification. To mix their cause with dissident concerns might damage chances for further emigration. But the Sakharov case is so unique -- and embodies such overriding moral issues that we must find every appropriate channel to press for an end to their exile.

Could our conscience permit us to do any less?

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