

Joel L. Lebowitz

Sakharov: Some Remembrances

I first met Andrei Sakharov Wednesday morning December 27, 1978 in the very crowded apartment of Victor and Irina Brailovsky, on Vernadskova Prospect, in Moscow. I was there together with my friend, Jim Langer, currently director of the Institute of Theoretical Physics in Santa Barbara, nine other western and about twenty refusnik scientists, at a conference organized by the Sunday Seminar of the refusniks. These were Soviet Jewish scientists who had applied to emigrate to Israel and had been refused permission by Soviet authorities. The seminar and conference were quasi-legal: the KGB kept a watchful eye and harassed the refusniks but the seminar (unlike a planned earlier one) was permitted to go on.

As Jim Langer recalls it in an article in the June 1979 issue of *Physics Today* "Sakharov... arrived quietly as the session began, and I might have missed him had he not been introduced by Victor Brailovsky in his opening remarks. At the first opportunity, Sakharov introduced himself again to Joel and me, and told us in his matter-of-fact way that his wife, Elena Bonner, was having trouble getting a visa to return to Italy for treatment of her eye problems. Unless he heard positively in the next few days, he would start a hunger strike. He asked us to visit him at his apartment on Friday after the end of the Conference".

I quote Jim again about our visit to the Sakharovs: "The Conference ended with a scientific session in the morning and a modest but very crowded and friendly party in the afternoon. At about four o'clock we left to have dinner with the Sakharovs. The temperature had dropped to -40 F; Chkalova Street between Sakharov's apartment building and the nearest subway station ran in just the right direction to catch the north wind. The keys to survival were long underwear, Russian fur hat, and enough energy to keep moving.

We arrived to learn that Mrs. Sakharov had received her visa. There would be no hunger strike and dinner was a much more relaxed affair than it might have been otherwise. We sat around the table in the small kitchen where Mrs. Sakharov served an excellent pot roast with tsimmas — carrots and plums. I had read Hedrick Smith's book, *The Russians*, and had the strong sensation of having been in this room before. Sakharov wore blue

jeans and an ill-fitting Norwegian-style sweater, spoke slowly in English — he complained that he had not had a chance to practice foreign languages during his years in secret research — and drank 'cook's tea' with apples in it. The phone rang frequently. Once there was a serious conversation; but otherwise, these seemed to be nuisance calls. When asked about KGB surveillance, Sakharov replied, 'It is a matter of no interest to me whatsoever'.

I remember how much I was struck by these words of Sakharov at that time. It was very clear that this was no boast or bravado — it was simply a fact. In some way they summarized the man for me then and later. Here was a man who spoke absolutely the same way no matter who was listening. Such a practice makes some things very simple — there is no need to adjust one's words to any particular audience, one just speaks the truth as one perceives it. But, of course, it is only saints, religious or secular, who achieve this kind of simplicity; and there is usually a high price to be paid for speaking the truth to those who do not want to hear it. Sakharov impressed me then as just such a saint. I certainly felt I was in the presence of moral greatness. My later meetings with Sakharov produced similar feelings.

The second such meeting was in July, 1979, when I passed through Moscow on my way to a conference in Tbilisi. My plane was delayed by a day, and I had some difficulties in finding my Intourist-assigned hotel. I finally arrived, late in the day, at the Brailovsky apartment, where I found a group of refuseniks as well as the Sakharovs, Andrei and Elena, waiting for me. I had not anticipated seeing the Sakharovs there, so I did not have with me the packet of photographs given to me for them by Tanya and Efrem Yankelevich — pictures of their daughter Anya, recently taken in Newton, Massachusetts on the occasion of her fourth birthday. Anya was the Sakharov's youngest grandchild and they were naturally eager to see pictures of this faraway member of the family (the Yankeleviches had emigrated to the U.S. about a year earlier). So, when the discussions ended, which was quite late, the Sakharovs and I took a taxi together to my hotel. They waited in the taxi (as Soviet citizens, they were not permitted to enter a hotel for foreigners) while I went to my room to fetch the precious photographs.

When I returned from Tbilisi to Moscow I met Sakharov again at a Refusenik Sunday Seminar held in the house of Yakov Alpert. The next day

I had a meeting at the beautiful old building housing the USSR Academy of Sciences with A. Alexandrov, then the president of the Academy. I was able to get this appointment on the basis of my being then the president of the New York Academy of Sciences. Our discussion at that meeting ranged over many topics which, I said, were hindering cooperation between U.S. and Soviet scientists. These concerned the problem of anti-semitism in Soviet mathematics and the status of refusniks and of imprisoned dissidents. Sakharov came up in the discussion at one point. Alexandrov was trying to justify the denial of exit visas for the refusniks by saying that their detention was certainly related to security. Alexandrov then asked (here I quote from notes I made after the meeting): "For what reason would we want to keep people in this country who do not want to be here?" "This is exactly what we don't understand", I replied. He then mentioned, as an example, Sakharov, who he said certainly could not be let out because of secret work he had done. Alexandrov added that Sakharov never asked to go although he had been invited. I said that I could understand about Sakharov, who truly had done secret work, but that others, like the Brailovskys, Albers, Alpert, and the Goldsteins had been connected with secret work only in a marginal way or not at all, and some of whom had even received clearance from their labs — surely after so many years these people possessed no secrets. He then mentioned "Levich the electrochemist" who had been let go after his work was no longer secret.

After some further discussions of these matters I again mentioned the names of other scientist prisoners, Shcharansky, Orlov, Gluzman, Bolonkin, Kovalev and said that there was a general feeling of dismay among Western scientists about this situation. He recommended minding one's own business in each country. I argued that the world had grown too small for this — and I again tried to link these problems with the SALT treaty being considered at that time by the US Senate. He replied that trying to amend the treaty would be very bad. I agreed and said that positive actions by the Soviet authorities concerning the scientists mentioned would certainly help the climate of US-Soviet understanding.

By the time of my next visit to Moscow, in April 1980, Sakharov was in exile in Gorky. The occasion of my visit was another refusnik conference and the political situation was much worse than it had been the year before. The Soviet Union had sent troops into Afghanistan in December 1979, and Sakharov had spoken out against this move. For this and other criticisms

of the government, he had been exiled to Gorky in January 1980. Detente was over and the United States was boycotting the Olympics, which were to take place in Moscow later that year. The National Academy of Sciences of the United States had also decided to suspend its exchange agreements with the USSR Academy of Sciences. The cold war was in serious danger of becoming hot.

It was in this atmosphere that I met again with Alexandrov. I shall now quote in some detail the notes I wrote up a few days after the meeting which took place on April 15, 1980, as a large part of our conversation concerned Andrei Sakharov. They are in the form of a dialogue — based on memory. I managed to get a copy of the notes back to the Soviet Union and Sakharov refers to some parts of them in a later letter to Alexandrov quoted in his Memoirs.

A Conversation with A. Alexandrov

L. I am very pleased to see you again. May I inquire about your health?

A. Health is all right.

L. On my last visit things were in bloom. Now it is cold and gray. This is also true of the general situation, it has deteriorated since then.

A. Yes, and some of the reasons are related to things we discussed at that time.

L. Could the President explain more what he is referring to.

A. It has to do with what started already almost two years ago; a reduction in scientific collaboration between our countries with cancellation of some conferences.

L. Yes, that is a problem. It is caused by the feelings of American scientists and also those in Western Europe about the situation of some of their colleagues inside the Soviet Union. They all feel very much upset by the way things are going and where they may lead. In this age we do not unfortunately have the luxury of saying good-bye and going off to live apart. We have to live together or we won't live at all.

I have in particular talked just very recently with Professor Weisskopf, who sends you his personal greetings, and Professor Feshbach, who is currently president of the American Physical Society. They are both concerned very much with the present diminution in scientific cooperation.

A. I know Professor Weisskopf, he is a member of our Academy but recently he sent me a telegram threatening to break relations. He tried to get the foreign members of our Academy to resign but he did not succeed, only a few resigned. They are all causing great harm by their attitude.

L. I know about the telegram of Professor Weisskopf and other foreign academicians stating that they would resign if Sakharov was expelled from the Academy. The feeling of United States and Western European scientists about this matter is very strong. I can report this to you also about western Europe because I have just spent a week in France.

A. As you know, Sakharov was not expelled from the Academy — there wasn't even any discussion about it [1]. I do, however, get many people coming up to me and asking why Sakharov was not expelled considering what he had done. He has got a very nice apartment in Gorky and he continues his work [2].

L. I should say again how much the Sakharov situation hinders scientific cooperation. We would like more cooperation and Professor Feshbach has written an editorial opposing the boycott. It is in the March issue of *Physics Today*. I have the Journal here with me and with your permission would like to leave it for you. It also happens to have in it a scientific article of mine about liquids and I would be pleased if you had a chance to read it and possibly even make comments on it.

The situation with Sakharov and others like him and also the situation of the refusnik scientists make cooperation very difficult. The authorities here could help greatly by taking some positive steps.

A. You want me to tell you what the true situation is with Sakharov? He was surrounded by a clique, particularly foreigners, who were inducing him to violate the law and we had to do something about it. We had two choices either to put him on trial for criminal activities or to isolate him from this clique. We decided for the second alternative and we sent him to Gorky, a place where he can do his work quietly. There are scientific institutes and members of the Academy in Gorky. He has got every opportunity to do his work there. He even had visits there from members of his group at the Academy [3]. As long as he is quiet and does his work there, nothing else will happen to him.

L. Western scientists think of Sakharov as a colleague who, after contributing greatly to the military development of his country, realized how precarious the situation of all humanity was in this nuclear age. He has,

therefore, devoted himself to the promotion of peace. Indeed he was a very strong supporter of SALT and declared that it should take precedence over the problem of dissenters.

A. Yes, that is true. He was right in this way.

L. We are afraid that the action against Sakharov may indicate a resurgence of the situation as it was under Stalin.

A. No. Any such comparison is unjustified and should not be made. In your country Kennedy (two brothers, one president and one senator) and King were assassinated. If we wanted we could have had the same happen to Sakharov.

L. There are always some criminals and madmen around who commit these crimes, but that is quite different from government actions. In the Soviet Union, the government is even more knowledgeable and involved in all activities than is the case in the United States: If anything happened to Sakharov, then the Soviet government would be held responsible.

A. I do not think the Kennedy assassination was just the work of an individual. Also we did not protest in the Oppenheimer incident.

L. Yes, but really all that happened to Oppenheimer was that he was denied access to secret information. He was not exiled or put on trial. Why would it not be possible to expel Sakharov?

A. (With a smile) That would be quite impossible. We have signed an agreement against nuclear proliferation and sending Sakharov to the West would certainly proliferate such things.

L. I do not know anything about whether Sakharov's knowledge of such matters is still relevant after a dozen years, but I am sure that he has never said anything about his secret work and considering his concern for peace would not divulge any secrets even if he was in the West.

A. Maybe he hasn't — maybe he is too smart to do that — but we did catch somebody who came out from there [4] with some secret material. We don't know whether it was Sakharov who gave it to him or one of his clique, but we do have the evidence.

You should remember that we let Sakharov do things here for fourteen years. When he started doing these things he was not living in Moscow. We invited him or granted his request to come here. He became a member of the Lebedev Institute. He is still getting his salary as a senior researcher plus his extra salary as an academician. This is greater than the salary of a minister.

L. The Soviet Union is a great state, one of the most powerful in the world. It survived and did very well during the last twelve years with Sakharov in Moscow and surely it can survive having him return to Moscow.

A. You don't like Pontryagin and we don't like Sakharov. We don't like Pontryagin either and had to remove him from an international mathematical committee. We sent Sakharov to Gorky to protect him from possible attacks by irate citizens. If Sakharov returned to Moscow there would again be the clique and the violations of the law and we would have no choice but to have him tried. In such a case he would surely be sentenced to at least five years' imprisonment.

L. If as you say the problem lies in the foreigners around him, why not take action against them when they violate Soviet law and leave Sakharov alone?

Most important, I would like to emphasize again that the reaction of Western scientists is an individual one and it shows how seriously they feel about Sakharov, Orlov and the refusnik scientists. Any positive steps, even relatively small ones, concerning these problems would go a long way towards restoring the general good will that was built up over many years and would enable us to cooperate again. This is important not only for its own sake but even more so for the sake of achieving generally better relations between our two countries so as to avoid war which would be catastrophic as we all know.

A. These matters are really insignificant compared to the big political issues which determine the future.

L. I would like to ask permission to differ here. I think we should separate the feelings of the scientific community from the official government position. I strongly believe the relatively small actions by the Soviet authorities with regard to Sakharov and the refusniks would change the climate in the scientific community. This in turn could then influence the political climate and could therefore help in the quest for peace. We should remember that small causes can have large effects.

A. American scientists are really more controlled by your government than are our scientists. They have only short-term, two or three year contracts and can be fired after their contracts expire. Soviet scientists, on the other hand, have secure lifetime employment.

L. This is actually partly true.

A. Collaboration is not really essential for us. After the revolution we

were attacked from all sides by the United States, England, and Japan, but we managed by ourselves. Also during the last war we did it mostly ourselves, although we also had help from allies. Now, too, great achievements have been made by our own scientists. We can really manage quite all right by ourselves so long as there is no war.

L. I am quite sure that you are right about the abilities of Soviet scientists. In my own field of mathematical physics they are certainly among the very best in the world, but, first, it is so much nicer to do it together and, second, there is always, as you mentioned, the spectre of war. That possibility is such a terrible one that we must do everything possible to diminish it; scientific collaboration is one way and an important way to do this.

A. The United States is putting up missiles in Europe, 630 of them. We don't want to aggravate the situation, but we shall have to respond to this.

Such a trivial thing like the Olympics' boycott is being done by the U.S. Government to aggravate relations. Indeed our relations with European countries are quite good.

L. I am not here as a representative of the United States Government and I cannot speak for it. What I do want to convey to you are the feelings of individual scientists about matters concerning human rights and the freedom of scientists. As you know, there are many American scientists like Bethe and Morrison who oppose certain arms build-ups. They, too, are concerned about Sakharov and related matters.

A. Our country does not need to import any oil from the outside, and we are completely self-sufficient also in other areas. We have no need for aggression. We do not want to have a war. If we had a war and conquered Europe, we would only have to feed them afterwards.

L. The problem is that if there was a war, there would be nobody left to be fed or to feed them.

I would like very much to continue this discussion, but I am afraid that it may be getting late for you, and there are some other matters I would like to bring up, President Alexandrov, if I may [5].

A. Please.

L. This involves the refusnik scientists, a problem that greatly concerns Western scientists. An improvement in this area would also be most helpful for improving scientific cooperation. As I mentioned when we talked last time and I wrote you later, it seems hard to believe that these people have

any security information of any relevance.

A. Why else would we want to keep here anyone who doesn't want to stay here [6] ?

L. This is what we don't understand. I feel that the Soviet Academy as the chief scientific body of the country could make an important contribution by appointing a committee to review the question of whether these people still have any security information.

A. The Academy cannot take the role of the state security office. There is only a limited amount that we can do. In some cases concerning people who have worked for the Academy we can advise, sometimes we can suggest — but our power is quite limited [7].

L. I understand — but I want to emphasize that this is an area where the Academy can make an important contribution not only to improving scientific cooperation, but also to world peace.

May I take your time now to bring up a few specific names: Alberts, Alpert, the Brailovskys, Golfand, Ioffe, Lerner, Lozansky, Meiman. (The interpreter asked me then if he could have the list and I gave it to him).

A. The only name I recognize on the list is that of Meiman [8]. He worked in my department and did some secret computations.

L. You surely must know, Mr. President, that theoretical computations on model systems done 25 years ago are not of much relevance today.

A. Well, these computations were done by hand before there were the big IBM computers and they may therefore still be of interest. Letting these people go might spread nuclear weapons [9]. There are some small countries in constant conflict with their neighbors who might be interested in this.

L. These small countries now have big computers and this is surely irrelevant to them.

A. Recently even a student was able to do almost all the computations for an atomic bomb [10].

L. This actually shows that the old computations are not really of any relevance now.

A. I will look into this matter (of Meiman).

L. In many cases these refusnik scientists have actually been told by their chiefs that they have been cleared by their institutions of holding classified information and therefore have no objection to their emigrating. Albers was told this by Academician Semenov, Alpert by his director and

Academician Logunov has several times told my colleagues that Moscow University has no objection to Irina Brailovsky leaving.

Victor Brailovsky was in fact told by emigration officials in 1976 that there was no objection to his leaving alone. He then applied in 1977 for a separate emigration visa, but up to now he has received no answer to this application [11]. It would be a most positive step if he was permitted to leave.

A. I will look into these cases, but I must tell you again that the powers of the Academy are limited.

L. I understand and I greatly appreciate your looking into these cases.

Before I leave, may I ask you if you have any message for Weisskopf, Feshbach and other American scientists.

A. I was surprised about Weisskopf's expression of preconditions for cooperation. If we start doing the same thing about Negroes and your health budget, what will you say? If we do this, we will go on the road to war.

There is no truth in the charge that the Soviets are aggressors. There must be no preconditions for scientific cooperation. If we start blaming each other, we won't get very far — certainly Secretary Brezhnev, who has gone through the agonies of the Second World War, does not want war. Even Sakharov has said that arms reduction agreements must take precedence.

We should see the way to agreements. Scientists should not set preconditions for cooperation.

L. Thank you very much, President Alexandrov, for this opportunity to see you again and for your offer to look into the matter of the refusnik scientists. I shall certainly convey your message to my colleagues.

A. You must again remember the limited power of the Academy.

L. (Standing up and shaking hands.) Thank you and Good-bye. I hope that you stay well, that things get better, and that we meet again soon.

After Gorky

I did not see Sakharov again until December 1988 when he visited the United States for the first time. There was an emotional reception for him at the New York Academy of Sciences — with tears of joy flowing down many cheeks. Sakharov, looking tired but in good health, spoke the truth as he saw it: there were very many human rights, political and economic

problems in the Soviet Union, including dissidents in labor camps, yet the west should support Gorbachev as his policies were reducing the risk of nuclear war — always the first consideration for Sakharov.

The next time I saw Sakharov was in July 1989 in the house of Tanya and Efrem in Newton. He was there together with Elena on an extended visit — working hard on his memoirs. We spent a very pleasant two hours in the kitchen drinking tea and coffee and eating blueberries and cottage cheese — one of Andrei's favorite foods. We discussed some science. I was on the way back from a Soviet-American Conference on Chaos at Woods Hole, and Sakharov expressed regret at not being able to devote enough time to science — he said he longed with all his heart to get back to doing physics full time. We also discussed the political situation in the Soviet Union. The conversation here was a bit complicated. I would ask a question in English; Andrei or Elena would start giving an answer but then they would get into an animated discussion with each other in Russian, which Tanya would then have to translate into English for my benefit. The problem of minorities in the Soviet Union, particularly the difficulties in Armenia, were very much on Sakharov's mind at that time.

Those worries were even more pronounced the last time I saw Sakharov. This was in September 1989 and we were again in the kitchen — this time the kitchen of his apartment in Chkalova Street. We arrived at their apartment about three in the afternoon, after having had a big lunch at the home of Vitaly Ginzburg, and found that Elena and Andrei had waited to share their lunch with us. Elena made some fried potatoes, a wonderful salad, little cakes and of course, 'cook's tea'. We again discussed the problem of minorities — Andrei and Elena were very upset about the Azerbaijani blockade of Karabakh then in effect which was causing great suffering. Andrei was complaining that Gorbachev was favoring the Azerbaijanis and he wanted to go to Karabakh himself to see if he could help. Meanwhile he and Elena were travelling the same evening to Swerdlovsk to help unveil a monument to Stalin's victims. Despite these problems and many many others concerning human rights and reforms of the Soviet system which kept Sakharov working eighteen hours a day he looked well and he showed us around the apartment explaining family photographs and other objects. I left the apartment with the feeling once again of having been in the presence of moral greatness — a feeling and memory that will always stay with me.

Notes on a Conversation with A. Alexandrov

1. According to reports, the following incident occurred at the recent Annual Meeting of the Soviet Academy. Following Alexandrov's report, which contained no mention of Sakharov, the floor was taken by Pontryagin who had requested an opportunity to speak. He complained that he had been unjustly accused in the West of antisemitism and that this campaign against him was organized by Sakharov. He, therefore, denounced Sakharov as an enemy of the Soviet Union and demanded that something be done about him.

There followed some applause and also some murmurings. Alexandrov then got up and said: "We all know that there are some kinds of people whom Pontryagin doesn't like in a biological way (an allusion to a statement Pontryagin once made about a Jewish editor of a journal). We will not discuss this matter further".

This was apparently the only time that Sakharov's name was mentioned at that meeting. According to some this was due to the Soviet government's decision not to exacerbate the situation further rather than, as reported in the Western press, to a real possibility that the Academy would not go along with condemnation and exclusion of Sakharov if so ordered by the government.

2. A different picture of Sakharov's situation in Gorky, obtained from conversations with his wife on April 13th, will be described separately. The main picture — the vigilance on him is extreme, really pathological.

3. I had already heard about this visit in Moscow. Vitaly Ginzburg, the head of Sakharov's department at the Lebedev Institute, (and others?) had apparently asked permission some time ago to visit Sakharov. On April 9th, Ginzburg and a scientific collaborator of Sakharov plus some official (of the Academy?) were apparently told to go and visit Sakharov on the 10th, which they did. It was believed that this was a political gesture to show the West that Sakharov had the possibility of continuing his work in Moscow (see Annex 3 — Ed.).

4. I do not remember if the word foreigner was mentioned here, but there did seem to be a disconcerting emphasis on the "foreign clique" around Sakharov. Passing secrets to foreigners is, of course, a much more serious offense.

5. At this point, I took out a little slip of paper from my pocket with

names on it. This elicited great interest from Bilev and Kozlov to whom I later gave it. It was now about 7 p.m. and Bilev kept on looking nervously at the big clock behind him.

6. This is an exact repetition of a phrase used in our conversation last July.

7. The name of Levich was mentioned here — I believe — as an example of a case where the Academy did advise that he had no security information.

8. He may have meant that Meiman was the only case of which he had a personal knowledge.

9. Again some reference to “nuclear proliferation”.

10. I am not sure whether he was referring to the Princeton student or to someone in Russia.

11. One of the most poignant moments of my whole trip occurred when I was told this story, prior to my seeing Alexandrov, by Irina and Victor Brailovsky. Knowing how close a family they are, with a son of 18 and a daughter of 5 years, I asked Victor whether he would really leave alone if given permission. “Immediately”, answered Irina, “so dangerous is Victor’s present situation”. (It was clear that this might mean a very, very long separation.)