BRITISH JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY
NEWS AND NOTES
Published by authority of the Royal College of Psychiatrists ©

THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS

MR LEONID PLYUSHCH

Mr Leonid Plyushch is a Russian mathematician who was arrested for 'samizdat' activities and interned in Dnepropetrovsk prison psychiatric hospital. He was released in January 1976 and emigrated to France, where he now lives with his family. It is believed that foreign pressure was an important factor in his release.

Mr Plyushch wrote privately to the President asking for a psychiatric examination; it was felt that this would not be appropriate and Mr Plyushch was invited to meet three senior Fellows of the College. The main purpose of the interview was to hear Mr Plyushch's experiences and see what might best be done to help other dissidents who might find themselves in a similar situation. Council have asked that the following report of the meeting be published in *News and Notes*.

Three senior Fellows of the College met Mr Leonid Plyushch on 15 March 1976. Mrs Plyushch, an interpreter and a secretary were present.

Mr Plyushch was welcomed and he expressed his gratitude to all the people who had helped him and were helping others by putting pressure on authorities and individuals in Russia.

Mr Plyushch was asked what could best be done to help people in a similar situation to that which he encountered; at what point in the committal proceedings and subsequently could intervention be effective, and was it possible to take any action when it became apparent that a dissenter was going to be dealt with as a case of mental disorder, and whom was it best to approach. Mr Plyushch said that it did help if the West got to know about a case in the early days and intervened at the beginning; academicians were

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https://doi.org/10.1192/S000712507630436X Published online by Cambridge University Press

sensitive to Western opinion. There was no proof, but there was very strong evidence to support the belief that intervention led to lighter sentences and better living conditions and treatment and more careful diagnosis. Political dissenters charged with an offence first saw a psychiatrist and sometimes they had warning of this; in his own case, three years before his arrest a friend of his had been told about him by an official. 'Your friend who has schizophrenia is in need of treatment in hospital.' The best thing was for news of such events to be sent to the West and quickly brought out in the open.

Mr Plyushch had had two psychiatric examinations, the first by Professor Lunz and the second by Professor Snezhnevsky; both were harsh, but Snezhnevsky's was an easier and better examination and more thorough. It was recommended that he should go to hospital instead of prison. Mrs Plyushch refused to accept her husband's diagnosis and she made a fuss; she was threatened with imprisonment and that her children would be taken away; but by then too many people knew about them.

There is no organized group of psychiatrists in Russia who can intervene in such cases. However, protests from the West were helpful in improving treatment and living conditions of dissenters in psychiatric prisons. We can help by ascertaining where the dissenter is detained and by making inquiries directly to the superintendent.

There are two types of people in the psychiatric hospitals: dissidents who were healthy and dissidents who were genuinely mentally ill, as well as the ordinary mental patients. The healthy dissidents were much better treated than the sick people who were very badly abused by the nursing auxiliaries who were prisoners or ex-prisoners. They hoped to change your attitude by showing what would happen to you if you did not give up your unusual ideas and conform; if you did not you would also have a breakdown and become like the other mentally ill patients.

The accepted ideology was that the State and the communist system was perfect and therefore anyone who dissented must be mad. This view was generally held by doctors and nurses, whose first loyalty was always to the State; the patient came second only. In Mr Plyushch's case he was told by a lady doctor 'You are an intelligent person, a mathematician. Very obstinate. You suddenly become interested in other things.' (When he was out of work he helped his wife, a child psychologist, by inventing games for the children, and in prison he wrote about this.) 'Suddenly you do not care about earning money and supporting your family. You knew that if you did these things against the Soviet Union you would be punished. Why did you do it? You could have been earning money, but instead you are in prison. Doesn't it prove you are ill doing all these things you knew would get you into trouble?'

Generally, all nurses and doctors went along with the system, believing that if you dissented you must be mad. All their orders came from the KGB. For a time he had been denied a photograph of his family and had not been allowed to keep his wife's letters; but the worst cruelties had been that of the doctors who interviewed him and criticized and laughed at everything he said. He had not been physically ill-treated but others had been given 'sulpherzine' as a punishment. At the start he was given nothing to counteract the side effects of his drugs. The 'hospital' was an old Czarist prison, with barbed wire, soldiers, searchlights and dogs.

In reply to a question Mr Plyushch said that occasionally it happened that a psychiatrist would send a dissenter to hospital rather than prison believing that he would be better off there. Occasionally a person who might otherwise be executed would be declared insane. This was the exception rather than the rule.

Mr Plyushch's disillusionment with the Soviet Union was because the Constitution was not followed, there was growing anti-semitism, and he felt the Crimean Tartars should be returned home. The bureaucratic machine was getting bigger, whereas in a real socialist state it would get smaller; Police forces should get smaller but they got larger; the gap between salaries and prices kept widening instead of narrowing. High-up communists were the aristocrats and got many privileges; they had their own shops where everything was cheaper, their own schools, their own doctors and special medical treatment. At elections there was only one candidate and no choice or chance of discussion.

It was when he heard Mr Khrushchev's denouncement of the cruelties of the Stalin era that Mr Plyushch felt he must protest and that such a situation must never be allowed to arise again.

Mr Plyushch said that the best way to help was to get information about dissidents at an early stage and then to make protest. One hopeful method of approach might be by contacting all the mental hospitals; they could not influence sentences, but living conditions and treatment would be improved. Once a dissident and a hospital were identified an approach should be made to the Director of the hospital. Experience showed that conditions improved immediately.

The meeting was not intended to be a medical examination, but the Fellows who met Mr Plyushch saw no indication of schizophrenia or other mental illness in an idealistic young man.

https://doi.org/10.1192/S000712507630436X Published online by Cambridge University Press