POLITICAL DISSENTERS

At the Quarterly Meeting in November 1975 (*News and Notes*, February 1976) it was resolved that the College should take the initiative in the formation and despatch of a Commission of psychiatrists and jurists to the USSR. The following is the subsequent exchange of correspondence.

TO THE SOVIET AMBASSADOR

9 June 1976

Your Excellency,

As you may be aware, there has been a lot of discussion about the alleged abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union, where it is claimed that political dissenters who are healthy are treated as mentally sick people and sent to psychiatric or prison hospitals.

The following Resolution was passed at the Quarterly Meeting of the Royal College of Psychiatrists held in London on 21 November, 1975:

> 'That this meeting, noting reports of continuing abuses of psychiatry for political purposes, urges the Officers, Council and Members of our College (1) to sustain their efforts at national level and through our connections with the World Psychiatric Association and other international organizations to secure cessation of such abuses wherever these are discovered to be part of State policy, and in particular (2) to try to bring relief to the prolonged sufferings of Soviet citizens Leonid Plyushch, Dr Semyon Gluzman, Vladimir Bukovsky and Zinovyi Krasivsky by our taking the initiative in exploring the possibility of the formation and despatch of a Commission of psychiatrists and jurists to investigate these persons' condition on the spot.'

Three senior Fellows of the College have subsequently seen Mr Leonid Plyushch who has now left Russia and is living in France. His testimony would appear to support allegations of what in the West would be condemned as a misuse of psychiatry. In order to assess the facts and, if the accusations are false, to clear the name of psychiatry in the Soviet Union, we would now like to proceed with arrangements for an Investigating Commission of three psychiatrists, three jurists and, perhaps, two interpreters, to visit Russia and would be grateful for your help in organizing this.

PETER RAWLINSON
Chairman of the Bar Council
W. LINFORD REES
President, Royal College of Psychiatrists

FROM THE FIRST SECRETARY, SOVIET EMBASSY

28 June 1976

Sirs,

With reference to your letter of 9 June about 'the alleged abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union' the Embassy has to state the following.

In the Soviet Union forensic psychiatric examinations and the placing of mental patients in psychiatric medical institutions are conducted strictly in accordance with the existing legislation on public health. Examination of patients is carried out by qualified psychiatrists if necessary in hospital conditions. In especially complicated cases leading psychiatrists of the country are invited to take part in the examination.

Mentally sick persons may injure themselves and the people around them and urgent hospitalization is a form of preventing socially dangerous actions on their part. Such hospitalization is envisaged in Article 36 of the Fundamentals of Legislation on Public Health of the USSR and is effected by public health authorities for the period during which a patient presents a danger. Detailed regulations concerning urgent hospitalization which provide for its substantiation, control over it and the discharge of patients, are contained in special instructions of the USSR Ministry of Public Health which clearly state the indications and contra-indications for urgent hospitalization.

In accordance with this during examination by forensic psychiatrists and compulsory treatment of mental patients who were declared insane only such methods of medical examination and treatment of patients are used that are certified for use in all medical establishments of the country and are generally accepted abroad. Only gross delusion or malicious intent can explain allegations about any harmful influence of medical preparations on patients.

The leading clinical psychiatric institutions of the country, including the Serbsky Central Research Institute of Forensic Medicine, systematically and extensively familiarize the medical and juristic community of our country with their work. The same

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is true of many prominent representatives of psychiatry and jurisprudence of foreign countries who have repeatedly assessed highly the activities of these institutions after visiting them.

It should be noted that there is a small number of mental patients whose disease, as a result of a mental derangement, paranoia, and other psychopathological symptoms, can lead them to anti-social actions which fall in the category of those that are prohibited by law, such as the disturbance of public order, dissemination of slander, manifestation of aggressive intentions, etc. It is noteworthy that they can do this after preliminary preparations, with 'a cunningly calculated plan of action', as the founder of Russian forensic psychiatry V. P. Serbsky wrote. To the people around them such mental cases do not create the impression of being obviously 'insane'. Most often these are persons suffering from schizophrenia or a paranoid pathological development of the personality. Such cases are known well both by Soviet and foreign psychiatrists.

The seeming normality of such sick persons when they commit socially dangerous actions is used by anti-Soviet propaganda for slanderous contentions that these persons are not suffering from a mental disorder.

The fact that certain foreign circles proceed from unseemly aims was confirmed once again at the open trial of Yakir and Krasin who were convicted for subversive propaganda and the dissemination of malicious concoctions about the Soviet Union, and at the subsequent press conference given by Yakir and Krasin in the presence of foreign correspondents. As was admitted by one of the convicted—Yakir—the slanderous allegations that normal people are placed in mental institutions were fabricated by him and widely circulated by the mass media in the West.

At the same time it should be stressed that the majority of persons against whom criminal proceedings are instituted and who are subjected to a forensic psychiatric examination in connection with their offences, are pronounced sane. This is stubbornly ignored by those who try to slander Soviet psychiatry just as they hush up the fact that most of the patients mentioned by them had had psychiatric treatment long before they were subjected to examination by forensic psychiatrists.

The propaganda clamour and smear campaign against Soviet psychiatry is nothing but an attempt to impede the international cooperation of medical men, to damage the developing fruitful contracts between scientists and cultural figures of different countries.

As to the intention of the Royal College of Psychiatrists to visit the USSR 'in order to assess the facts and, if the accusations are false, to clear the name of psychiatry in the Soviet Union' we should tell you that high professional and moral qualities of the Soviet specialists who have dedicated their lives to this noble profession are well and widely known and are certainly in no need of being 'assessed' by foreign 'investigating commissions'. British specialists who have been to our country surely know that and we hope that at least some of your colleagues are ashamed of this attempt to sow doubts as far as their Soviet colleagues are concerned and to interfere in Soviet internal affairs.

G. Gventsadze
First Secretary

To the First Secretary

26 July 1976

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your very full and informative letter of 28 June 1976.

You strongly deny the allegations of the abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union and it is in the hope of proving these allegations false that the College and the Bar wished to send an investigating commission to Russia. The final paragraph of your letter abhors the accusations that are being made, but does not seem to completely preclude the possibility of allowing a visit by an investigating commission. If there is a chance that permission might be granted I would be very grateful for your advice on how we should proceed.

W. Linford Rees

From the First Secretary

28 July 1976

Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter of 26 July I have to say that a visit to the Soviet Union of any 'investigating commission' is out of the question for the simple reason that it would constitute an inadmissible interference in the Soviet internal affairs. I hope you realize that an idea of subjecting other countries to foreign scrutiny is something entirely alien to the concept of sovereignty. As I understand, this point of view prevails in your own country, too. Indeed, as your Sovereign said during her recent trip to the United States, 'we learnt to respect the right of others to govern themselves in their own ways'.

Having said that I would like to add that Soviet scientists, psychiatrists included, of course, welcome contacts with their colleagues in other countries for this, apart from any practical benefits, leads to improved understanding between scientific communities and people at large.

G. Gventsadze

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