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Soviet Insecurity: A Lonely Woman Poses a Threat
(Published column on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe that took place in Bern, Switzerland in April, May 1986) - By Louis S. Segesvary, Visiting Foreign Affairs Fellow, Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies

BERN — Of all the forms of human suffering, the most personally devastating are surely those associated with deeply felt relationships involving loved ones.

The meetings in April and May in Bern, Switzerland, of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the parallel conference sponsored by Resistance International and the Andrei Sakharov Institute to review the Human Contacts provisions of the Helsinki Accords have offered fresh reminders to the world of the costliness of violated human relationships and further reasons for renewed public protest.

Two cases in particular illustrate this landscape of human suffering, which remains removed from the public scrutiny and corresponding public outrage it deserves. They were presented by human rights advocates on the opening day of the parallel conference as evidence of continuing violations by the U.S.S.R of the Helskinki Accords.

One disturbing case regards an aged Latvian woman, Lidija Doronina, now 61 years old, imprisoned for the third time in 1983 by Soviet authorities on the charge of "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda." According to an Amnesty International report, Mrs. Doronina had earlier been imprisoned in 1970 for possessing the works of Adrei Amalrik and Aleksander Solzhenitzyn and had been released after two years. She then managed to eke out a living as a seamstress and involved herself in church work. During her time in prison, her husband—who had also been imprisoned and had been paralyzed by a stroke—had died. She continued to try to help former Latvian political prisoners. When seized again this last time in the course of mass arrests, she was condemned for possessing Helsinki group documents and dissident writings. Sentenced to five years in prison to be followed by three years of internal exile, she remains confined to this day. Plagued also by a history of tuberculosis, which harsh prison conditions can only exacerbate, she could well die in prison.

Ever since her last arrest, her sister-in-law, who lives in Sweden, has been appealing to the Soviet authorities to permit her release to let her join what family she has there. But all appeals have been in vain. Meanwhile, this lonely, feeble, and aging woman—whom a former Latvian political prisoner once described as one "who has spent her whole life ministering to the wounded and serving in God's name—continues to be treated as a threat to the Soviet state and is denied the last vestiges of personal contact remaining to her.

A simple poem written in Lidija's honor is perhaps more effective in demonstrating her plight than any of the numerous appeals already made on her behalf. The poem asks: "How do you spend your days, Lidija, How do you spend your days?" and answers: "In labor, pain, and loneliness, that's how I spend my days."

But if the case of Mrs. Doronina troubles us for its robbing the debilitated and the aged of any meaningful contact, the case of Anatoly and Galine Michelson shows how the same Soviet system can condemn the young and vigorous to a similar fate of forced separation, a separation that in their case has become a thirty year nightmare—marking theirs as the longest-standing unresolved U.S.-Soviet case of a divided family. Their case was addressed to both conferences and is drawn from what the U.S. Ambassador to the conference, Michael Novak, calls this "mailbag heavy with pain."

A native of the Soviet Union, Mr. Michelson defected in Vienna at the age of 38 during the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution. But he had to leave his wife and eight-year-old daughter behind in the process. Eventually he became a U.S. citizen. He knows it was a gamble, but believes that "the only way was to leave and work for the things once believes in." He has exhausted every possible appeal to bring his family out, even meeting with President Jimmy Carter three times. He has had no success.

Now worn out by his struggle, Mr. Michelson believes public concern and protest his last chance. He is able to talk with his wife by telephone once a week, and he sends her financial support. Divorce and a new wife were never considered. "It's unthinkable," Mr. Michelson says. "You would not divorce your child, father, or mother would you? It's unthinkable." He has thought of suicide, as might be expected, but says, "If I commit suicide, then hope would disappear.

"At first I thought life without freedom would not be worth living," he says. "Afterward I realized life without family is not worth living."

Up to now his struggle has been a losing one, and though a religious man he has come to question even the use of his continuing prayers. Here he might look to the brilliant Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis. For Bonhoeffer, the intense longing for the beloved during forced separation was a reminder that the love still existed and that the relationship therefore remained intact. That was the crucial reality above all, and when the Michelsons refuse to give up hope they witness to such a bold claim, indeed to love's very power and glory.

There has, of course, been another kind of witness at Bern during these conferences, an open and public kind of witness as to what must constitute the terms for public recognitions as civilized society. These terms necessarily include minimal degrees of respect for the must crucial human relationships, family relationships. When essential human contacts are repeatedly denied out of some distorted fears as to the threats imposed by lonely old women or husbands and wives and children desperate for reunion, moral claims to belong to civilized society are place in jeopardy.

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