

# Abram Kagan

Ithaca, NY  
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## Highlights

### A. The End: Departure

E. D. After over ten years of waiting, Abram Meyerovich Kagan has been finally allowed to leave the USSR. He has come to the US and is now visiting here at Cornell for a couple of days. So, Abram Meyerovich, tell me about your adventures. You can start with whatever you like, but I would like you to talk not only about your experience as a refusenik<sup>1</sup> but also about various mathematicians, about your mathematical biography, and other things. So what would you like to start with your mathematical biography or with your story as a refusenik?

A. K. Perhaps I should start from the end. At least this would be a more original opening because most people naturally tend to tell their stories in temporal sequence. So let me start at the end.

E. D. Okay, let's do that.

A. K. The resolution of our troubles with leaving the country came in a rather unexpected way. It happened on December 10, 1987. I remember it as clearly as if it happened only yesterday, not in Leningrad but in Chicago. I remember that I was sitting at the desk writing a letter to my son Dima, who left the USSR with his wife Clara in October of 1987 and was at that moment in Canada. We were very busy, and I felt slightly uncomfortable because our children used to write to us quite regularly. We exhausted all possible recourses in our appeal to the authorities. I even wrote a letter to the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet,<sup>2</sup> Gromyko.<sup>3</sup> In it I tried to explain to him our situation, namely, that we applied for an exit visa a while ago and that considering our age the period

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refusenik>

<sup>2</sup> The highest legislative body in the Soviet Union.

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei\\_Gromyko](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei_Gromyko)

of six months required for the review of our applications was unreasonably long. I petitioned him to speed up the review of our file. In my letter I also told Dima that one of his friends finally received an exit visa and was about to leave. As I wrote these words, I heard my phone ring. I picked up the handset and heard a charming female voice say: "Inspector Leonova is speaking. Abram Meyerovich," she said, "this time we have good news for you. You can leave the country. Tomorrow please stop by the local OVIR,<sup>4</sup> pick up the papers for the military commissariat, sign your exit visa, and start counting days."

## **B. The Beginning: A Refusenik in Limbo**

E. D. Now let's go back to the beginning.

A. K. This was the resolution of the long story that had begun way back in November 25, 1976. On this day, being the law-abiding citizen that I am, I brought to the Director of the Leningrad Division of the Steklov Mathematical Institute (LOMI) Faddeev,<sup>5</sup> then simply a doctor of physics and mathematics, a written petition which stated the following: "In view of my desire to initiate the application process for an exit visa to Israel, I would like to ask you to provide me with ..." I am not sure what it was called exactly.

E. D. Was it a character reference?

A. K. No, it wasn't a character reference. "I would like to ask you to provide me with a document following the example attached to this petition." At that time character references were no longer required by the OVIR, but I still had to submit a document which stated the following: "the Steklov Mathematical Institute has no material or other claims against Mr. Kagan. This document is provided in view of Kagan's intention to depart to Israel." I gave this paper to Faddeev, and from that moment mathematical life in the Institute seems to have come to a sudden halt. Faddeev asked me to keep this information a secret for a few days because, as he said, he had to clarify a few things. I quickly agreed because I was not looking for any publicity myself. If only I could I would have preferred to leave in total secrecy. Moreover, in order to make good on my promise, I decided not to show up at the Institute at all. But while staying at home I started receiving phone calls

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<sup>4</sup> Office of visas and registration

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludvig\\_Faddeev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludvig_Faddeev)

from my friends and colleagues who were telling me that they already knew everything. They told me that they learned about it in the Institute. When I came back in a few days, Faddeev told me that obviously the Institute had no material claims against me but that it did have other claims. What other claims could they possibly have? At that time I was ready to agree to anything. I said: "Alright, just list all other claims the Institute has against me, and I will take this paper to the OVIR." At this point he told me that in accordance with the rules, I should expect to receive the answer within a month. He also added that, due to the elections to the Academy which were taking place at that time, it might take even longer. Frankly, I couldn't wrap my head around the connection between the elections to the Academy and my petition.

E. D. I assume you weren't one of the candidates.

A. K. Oh no! Certainly not. [*Both laugh*]. I was not one of the nominees on that occasion. It bears mentioning that at that time I wasn't very savvy about all these bureaucratic procedures. It was only later, after seven or eight years of banging my head against the wall, that I became sufficiently qualified to give professional advice to anyone on the matters of immigration. If it had been possible to start a business in the USSR as easily as it is done here in the US, I certainly could have opened an immigration consulting firm which would probably be quite successful today. Back then, however, I was completely inexperienced. So I said: "Alright, I'll wait. What can I do?"

I can't say that we were in no rush. In fact we were. We applied for an exit visa together with my wife's sister. She graduated from a library service program and therefore could hardly be prevented from leaving the country for security reasons. Yet she worked in the department of scientific and technical information, and, when she requested an analogous document from her employer, she was told that she was a young professional who had to work off her debt to the state. It was clear that she had no intention to stay. She even appealed to the Prosecutor's Office, asking them to interfere. Anyhow, it was clear that it would take her some time to sort out these issues, and this is why I didn't insist on expediting my own request.

But let me repeat: the main problem was my utter lack of experience. Fortunately or unfortunately, you get to apply for an exit visa only once, and the experience you gain in the process is the experience that only other people can draw on. It is of no service to you.

E. D. Moreover, USSR is a country where it is difficult to give advice to those who are most in need of it. [*Laughs*].

A. K. Yes, you are absolutely right. [*Laughs*]. I hope this recording will be of some use. Perhaps people who want to leave the USSR will listen to my interview and will follow my advice. [*Both laugh*].

Anyhow ... Wait, there was something else they told me. Oh, yes, at that time Charles Stein<sup>6</sup> chanced to be visiting at LOMI (i.e. the Leningrad Branch of the Steklov Mathematical Institute). He was there on sabbatical leave.

E. D. I think he is a great sympathizer of the Soviet regime.

A. K. Yes, he was a sympathizer. I am not sure what his political views are today. He is a man of leftist views, but I respect him a lot despite our ideological differences. Many people in LOMI were under the impression that it was Stein who convinced me to apply for an exit visa, while as a matter of fact he urged me to think very carefully about my decision to leave the Soviet Union. Nevertheless somehow they felt that I couldn't reach that decision on my own.

Anyhow, I was told not to show up in LOMI too often because Stein was there. To be honest, I don't know why they said that. At that time LOMI had its temporary quarters in a building on Krasnoputilovskaya Street because the main building of the Institute was under reconstruction. The new building wasn't very comfortable to work in. Moreover, it was very far from my house. So it didn't take much to persuade me not to show up there too often. Interestingly, when I finally came there after a week or two, I was told: "Why don't you come to LOMI? Do you think that once you applied for an exit visa you don't have to come to work anymore?" My response was: "What am I supposed to do? I can't both show up at work and avoid to be seen by my colleagues."

At any rate, I still had two weeks of unused vacation for that year. So I decided to take them. Then suddenly, on January 5 or 6, I was notified that I had to terminate my vacation and report back to work or something of that sort.

E. D. Was it January of 1977?

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<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Stein\\_%28statistician%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Stein_%28statistician%29)

A. K. Yes, 1977. I was still waiting for the document I had requested from the Institute. In the meantime the elections took place, and Faddeev became member of the Academy of Sciences.

E. D. Did he become a full member right away?

A. K. Yes, he never was a corresponding member. So I was called back from my vacation. I read the formulation of the order. It said: "Kagan must be recalled from his vacation." I must say that at that time I wasn't familiar with the Soviet Labor Code at all. Not that I think that anyone reads it today. Therefore, I didn't know the reasons they could possibly have for ordering me back to work. I knew that there was a legal formula "on account of production needs." So I came to LOMI and asked about the legal grounds for recalling me. I said that I knew that one possible ground could be "on account of production needs." They said: "No, this is not it. We simply decided to terminate your vacation and that's it." It is important to notice that Soviet labor laws do not recognize this as a legitimate ground. But let me repeat: at that time I was very inexperienced in these matters.

E. D. In addition, you were not yet prepared for the struggle.

A. K. No, Evgeniy Borisovich, I was not. When I came back from vacation, the administration of LOMI launched a massive campaign against me with the purpose of forcing me into a "voluntary" resignation. To force somebody to resign is not an easy task. In other words, there is no such law that allows the employer to force the employee to resign, nor is there a law that allows the employer to fire the employee for submitting an application for an exit visa. Off the record they told me that if I resigned they would help me find an equivalent position elsewhere. With all my lack of experience even I realized that for them to find an equivalent position would be twice as difficult as simply to leave me in LOMI. Therefore, I made it very clear that I was not going to resign. Resignation was out of the question.

In response they decided to convene a meeting. It wasn't entirely clear what the status of that meeting was. It wasn't exactly a "workforce meeting", if I may use the terminology of 1979 in the context of 1977 when the term "workforce" didn't exist yet in the Soviet labor law. Anyhow, the meeting was attended by people from the labs which were close to the lab of Petrashen' where I worked. In attendance were statisticians, people from the lab of wave propagation theory, and many active communist party members from

other labs. The meeting featured a number of speeches. I repeat: the legal status of this meeting is still unclear to me. The meeting adopted the following resolution: first, to ask the scientific council of LOMI to consider the question of my pre-term re-election; second, to ask the council not to re-elect me and at the same time to ask the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences to strip me of – guess what? – the rank of senior research associate. The degree of the Doctor of Sciences was conferred upon me by the university, so that stripping me of that degree was outside of the jurisdiction of the scientific council.

What could I do? I wasn't allowed to speak during the meeting. The meeting voted unanimously for the resolution. Only two people abstained: Petrashen' and Borya Harlamov,<sup>7</sup> who works in applied statistics. As to the content of the speeches, if I had the transcript and I could show it to those who spoke against me, I bet they would feel very uncomfortable about what they said.

After the meeting the director of LOMI summoned me again and told me that the scientific council was scheduled to convene in two or three days and would most likely opt to accept the resolution adopted at the meeting. He said that in this situation I should probably resign of my own accord. I said that there was no way I would do it myself and that I was going to file a complaint, which I did. I wrote a letter to Academician Vladimir Tuchkevich who was in charge of the academic institutes in Leningrad,<sup>8</sup> where I explained the situation as it was. I said that I had done nothing illegal, that I was trying to apply for an exit visa in accordance with all the rules, and I urged him to protect me from such attacks. I don't know what exactly happened, but the meeting of the scientific council never took place, neither in three days nor in three years. Somehow the issue seemed to have evaporated.

What happened next is that they asked me to put my signature on the order of the Director of Steklov Mathematical Institute (MIAN) Vinogradov. In accordance with this order, my research topic, statistical theory of estimation, was being removed from the research agenda of the Institute. At that time I didn't fully understand the implications of this order. Not being versed in the art of bureaucratic manoeuvring, I thought that this was a step toward firing me. If a certain research topic is removed from the Institute's research

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ipme.ru/ipme/labs/ensure/harlamov.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ioffe.rssi.ru/tuchkevich.html>

agenda, what else can it mean for a person who is paid to do research on this topic and who doesn't teach? I immediately wrote a letter of complaint to the President of the Academy of Sciences Academician Alexandrov,<sup>9</sup> explaining that I had been working on this topic for many years, that my results were published, frequently cited, and universally acclaimed; and that for this reason I could not interpret the removal of my topic from the Institute's research agenda as anything else but an attempt to oust me from my job. I asked him to interfere in this matter without delay. In response I received a rather rude letter not from Alexandrov but from the director of the Department of Human Resources in the Academy of Sciences. If I am not mistaken, this was Yakov Tsyarkin.<sup>10</sup>

E. D. Yes, I remember this person.

A. K. Do you? In that case I am not mistaken. In his letter he told me that the question of what topics should be included in the Institute's research agenda or excluded therefrom was within the purview of the Division of Mathematics of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Having read that, I wrote a letter of complaint to the head of the Department of Science and Educational Establishments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. I also forwarded a copy to the president of the Academy of Sciences. In my letter I explained that when I filed a complaint about the removal of my research topic by no means did I try to suggest that the Academy of Sciences should transfer its jurisdiction over the question of research topics to me or to the director of the Institute. I only tried to draw attention to the simple fact that my research topic was about to be cut. I said that since the essence of my complaint had been ignored I was compelled to appeal to the Department of Science and Educational Establishments for protection.

After that I received another letter from Mr. Tsyarkin but of a different purport. He said that he received a clarification from the Director of LOMI and now member of the Academy of Sciences Faddeev that the removal of my topic, statistical theory of estimation, from the research agenda of the Institute should by no means be interpreted as a step toward releasing me from my job. [*Laughs*].

From this point on, I think, my relationship with the president of the Academy of Sciences was severed.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatoly\\_Petrovich\\_Alexandrov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatoly_Petrovich_Alexandrov)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.autsubmit.com/editorials/ed34\\_5.html](http://www.autsubmit.com/editorials/ed34_5.html)

E. D. When did this all happen?

A. K. It all happened in January or February of 1977. I think January. I am not even sure that I applied to the OVIR yet.

### C. Shunned

E. D. To what extent were you shunned by your colleagues in the Institute?

A. K. I should mention that in the very beginning I was in absolute isolation. You see, so long as the Institute stayed in the building on Krasnoputilovskaya Street, there was no way to isolate me. Offices in that building were enormous. They were former classrooms. Letting me have one of those all to myself would have meant depriving half of the Institute of their premises. So they transferred me from the lab of statistics to some other lab with very few people. Later, when LOMI started moving back into its old and recently renovated building on the bank of Fontanka, I stayed in the building on Krasnoputilovskaya Street until the very end. But it was much easier already. There were very few people. I was practically left to my own devices. In this way the Institute was firmly protected from any Zionist propaganda.

E. D. And your “pernicious influence”.<sup>11</sup>

A. K. Yes, from my “pernicious influence.” Nevertheless, I must say that statisticians and pretty much everyone else exercised extreme caution. I remember that at first every time I attended a seminar there was always a space of at least two chairs between me and people around me. But, you see, God extended his good favor to me when two statisticians from India, Bhat<sup>12</sup> and Adke, were visiting LOMI in the context of an exchange program between the Soviet and the Indian Academies of Sciences. Since I had been collaborating with Rao<sup>13</sup> for a long time, and both of them knew Rao very well, they did not join the boycott against me. On the contrary, they made a point of being very friendly with me. During the month of their visit in LOMI they were the only people who had no problem coming to my office.

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<sup>11</sup> Dynkin ironizes by using a trite expression of Soviet officials.

<sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B.\\_R.\\_Bhat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._R._Bhat)

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calyampudi\\_Radhakrishna\\_Rao](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calyampudi_Radhakrishna_Rao)



E. D. Did you have your own office?

A. K. I think I shared it with Petrashen'. He was never afraid of having dealings with me. He used to say: "If Kagan has no work space, let him use my office. I rarely come to LOMI. It will be best for him and everyone else."

E. D. He comes across as a very decent person.

A. K. He belongs to that old school which follows the principle of helping people who find themselves in a bad spot instead of beating them down. I think the new generation of scholars seems to have completely forgotten this principle. He was the head of my lab. I can hardly imagine what would have happened to me if I had been working in some other lab.

As for the two Indian mathematicians, they couldn't care less about Zionist propaganda. They were coming to my office. I was coming to theirs. In seminars they sat next to me because they saw that there was plenty of space around me. When they left, many of my colleagues thought that, if the Indians were not punished for associating with me, maybe the Soviet ones could get away with it too. Gradually the boycott became less and less strict, although some of my former colleagues never set their foot in my office for the entire period of eleven years up until my departure.

#### **D. Difficulties in Attending Conferences**

E. D. None of this surprises me, to be honest. You see, I didn't encounter many obstacles when I was leaving the Soviet Union. However now<sup>14</sup> nobody has the courage to communicate with me even by mail.

A. K. I am not even talking about that. Although I must say that in the last few years the situation got a little bit better.

Alright, let me get back to my story. I managed to survive in the Institute, and it was clear that I was going to keep my job. However, I couldn't participate in any seminars or academic events outside of the city of Leningrad. They were completely out of my reach. One time, however, I got a unique opportunity to participate in a small seminar on the

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<sup>14</sup> Namely, at the time of the interview in 1987. However, around that time a major change in the political climate in the USSR was already underway.

stability of statistical procedures. The seminar was organized by Zolotarev<sup>15</sup> and was held in Panevėžys.<sup>16</sup> Since then it has transformed into an almost annual event. Zolotarev sent me an official invitation. I wrote a proposal, and my talk was accepted. I was almost ready to go when all of a sudden I received a phone call from a person whose name I forgot. He said: "Perhaps it would be better if you didn't attend." "Why? What's the matter?" I asked with indignation. He said: "I believe that Panevėžys is a closed or semi-closed city."<sup>17</sup> I said: "You are talking nonsense. Foreign tourists go there all the time to see the performance of Banionis.<sup>18</sup> How can it possibly be a closed city?" He tried to come up with an answer but was in fact just grasping at straws. I called Zolotarev and asked him to clarify the situation. He said: "Don't listen to anyone. If it were really the case that you are not allowed to attend, they would find a way to notify the organizational committee of the seminar, and that would be the end of it. But since they say all of this at their own whim, don't pay any attention and come."

I came to Faddeev to file the paperwork related to this trip. I handed to him the invitation. He stared at it for a long time and then said: "The invitation looks fine, but I don't see the code number of the Institute of Mathematics of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences." "You are right," I said, "I don't see it either." "Alright," he said, "I will sign the paper, but you have to bring it back with the number." "I will certainly do that," I replied. "And if I don't, I will pay for this trip out of my own pocket." He said: "No, that's not going to happen. If you go, the Institute will reimburse your expenses." When I arrived to the seminar, out of sheer curiosity I asked other participants if there was any code number on their invitations. Everyone had a copy identical to mine. After a week I completely forgot about it.

E. D. Zolotarev acted quite bravely in this situation, didn't he?

A. K. Yes, he did.

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<sup>15</sup>Interview with him is a part of this collection.

<sup>16</sup>A city in Lithuania.

<sup>17</sup> In the Soviet Union a 'closed city' was a settlement with travel and residency restrictions due to security considerations. As a rule these were communities located close to the border or ones that hosted sensitive military, industrial or scientific facilities.

<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donatas\\_Banionis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donatas_Banionis)

E. D. He even invited Taksar.<sup>19</sup>

A. K. After that I attended all the meetings of this conference, except for the one which Zolotarev organized in Moscow. There was nothing wrong with holding the conference in Moscow, but the problem was that he elevated it to the level of an international conference. He invited Jana Jureckova<sup>20</sup> from Czechoslovakia, and some people from Poland and Bulgaria. So formally speaking the conference became international. As usual, I applied to give a talk. But when I received an invitation saying that I was being invited to an international seminar on stability, the administration of LOMI didn't know what to do. I think that the secretary in charge of international affairs of LOMI urgently got in touch with the organizers of the conference, the International Institute of Systemic Research. I don't know what transpired between them, but the organizers ended up canceling their invitation. I never received the cancelation, but LOMI didn't give a green light for my attendance. Since the organizers did not insist on bringing me to the conference, I went to Moscow only to meet Jana Jureckova and didn't stop by at the conference, even though it was open to public. I just wanted to express my disappointment with how the organizers handled the matter. If they wanted to invite me, they had to think everything through more carefully.

I want you to compare this international conference with the First Bernoulli Congress in Tashkent<sup>21</sup> in 1986, in which both Freidlin<sup>22</sup> and I were able to participate. Among the participants of the Congress were not only three scholars from the Soviet bloc but scores of Western mathematicians.

E. D. Do you know that there was an interesting struggle here too?

A. K. Of course I do. I just want to highlight the huge difference between 1979 and 1986. My own situation was gradually improving as well. In 1983 the editor of the *Probability Theory* notified me that if wanted to submit a paper to the journal it would be

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<sup>19</sup>Interview with him is a part of this collection.

<sup>20</sup> See "Life and Work of Jana Jurečková: An Appreciation" (<http://projecteuclid.org/DPubS?verb=Display&version=1.0&service=UI&handle=euclid.imsc/1291044737&page=record>)

<sup>21</sup> <http://epubs.siam.org/doi/abs/10.1137/1132031>

<sup>22</sup>Interview with him is a part of this collection.

considered based on its scholarly merits alone and nothing else. Prior to that Zolotarev had been publishing my papers in the proceedings of his conferences.

E. D. Did you publish anything abroad?

A. K. I published one paper in a collection papers celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rao.

E. D. Did you receive official permission?

A. K. Yes, I did. I sent a request to the department of mathematics which was approved.

### **E. Help from “Behind the Iron Curtain”**

A. K. I must say that I am very happy to have participated in the Congress. There I learned about the efforts of mathematicians abroad to help me leave the Soviet Union, including the Japanese. They emphasized that they were involved in this campaign too.

E. D. Joel Lebowitz,<sup>23</sup> for example, was very active and a few other people as well.

A. K. Yes, they did a lot for me.

E. D. Even in the documents that I transferred to you today there is something about the efforts of the Japanese.

A. K. Yes, I was also aware of the efforts of Australian mathematicians, to say nothing about the Americans and the French.

E. D. You probably don't know that, but I can tell you right now that shortly before you were granted permission to leave the country, we appealed to our senator Moynihan,<sup>24</sup> asking him to influence the Soviet government. After we mailed our letter we learned that you received your exit visa. So we had to write a follow-up letter. [*Laughs*].

A. K. Unfortunately, I didn't receive his letter. But a friend of mine in Los Angeles forwarded to me a copy of the letter of their senator, Wilson, addressed to the Soviet ambassador Dubinin,<sup>25</sup> in which he petitioned on my behalf. The letter was dated December 17, while we received our exit visa on December 10.

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<sup>23</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joel\\_Lebowitz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joel_Lebowitz)

<sup>24</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel\\_Patrick\\_Moynihan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Patrick_Moynihan)

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoot/docs/biographi\\_en/dubinin/dubinin.htm](http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoot/docs/biographi_en/dubinin/dubinin.htm)

## F. Dima Kagan

Many people invested a lot of effort to help me. There is no question about it. All these years of waiting were extremely difficult, not only for me but for my loved ones as well. My son encountered a lot of difficulties. He was first denied admission, then accepted, then expelled, then reinstated again. Take the story with his expulsion. He was expelled from the Leningrad Hydrometeorological Institute after he allegedly failed his exam on meteorology, although only just a week before that he won a student competition in this very subject. But that's fine. One could have expected that because a year or so prior to this incident the same professor of meteorology failed the daughter of our refusenik friends.

Our son found a job, first as a computer operator and later as a programmer. However, the rule was that after nine month of work without any complaints on the part of the employer one could apply to be reinstated as a student, either at the same educational institution or at a different one. But the rule was formulated in such a way as to give much discretionary power to the rector. We didn't know what to do. Then one my friends asked me if my son would be willing to become a student at the evening program of physics at the Leningrad State University. I said: "Of course, he would. But there is no way they will take him?" He said: "Why not? The university would be glad to take him." "Are you being serious?" I asked. He said: "Yes, absolutely. He just has to submit an academic certificate, which is required in any college or university and a character reference." I came to the Leningrad Hydrometeorological Institute and told the administrative assistant that I needed an academic certificate for my son. She said: "You didn't choose a very good time. Many people are on vacation right now." I said: "Just tell the rector that it is the father of Dima Kagan who was expelled for such and such reasons. I am sure the rector will ask you to issue the certificate." Coming back from the rector's office, the administrative assistant said: "Indeed, the rector granted permission to issue the certificate. But why don't you restore your son back in our institute rather than somewhere else?"

E. D. When did it happen?

A. K. I think it happened in 1984.

E. D. So it was already under ... what's his name? Chernenko?<sup>26</sup>

A. K. Yes, I believe so. She said: "If he wants to be reinstated here, there is no need for an academic certificate, only a character reference from his place of work." Since I wasn't a hundred per cent sure that the university was going to accept him, I said: "You know what, give me the certificate, just in case. I assume that if we decide to have him reinstated here the fact that I asked for a certificate wouldn't be an obstacle." She said: "No, certainly not." So we took the certificate, submitted it to the university, and started waiting for the results. Of course, every now and then we were making inquiries about the status of our application because, being familiar with how things worked in the Leningrad University, I wasn't certain that my son would be accepted until the very end. It turned out that the first year curricula in the Hydrometeorological Institute and in the Department of Physics at the Leningrad University were only slightly different in terms of the number of credits. The list of first year classes was almost identical. We were told that if the teachers considered that Dima did not accumulate sufficient amount of credits during his first year he would have to take some additional exams. We were completely fine with that. In the meantime I kept asking my contact in the Leningrad University about his chances of being accepted. He claimed that his chances were good.

E. D. Who was the person who said that? A mathematician?

A. K. No, this was a friend of mine who worked in the Department of Physics. He had some good connections in the university administration. One of his friends was Yura Vladimirov, who was deputy pro-rector for research. He passed away recently of a heart attack. He was only about forty years old. He knew everyone in the Department of Physics. I approached him and asked him about my son's application. He said that if all the requisite documents were in order there would be no obstacles. "How is it possible?" I asked him incredulously. He said: "I am telling you, there will be no problem." "Alright," I said, "but what about the *partkom* committee?" They have a formal academic committee dealing with the reinstatement of students. They hold their sessions once a year, on August 25, and decide one way or the other. Their decisions are final and there is no way to appeal them. So I said: "But before his case is considered by the academic committee, it will have to pass

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<sup>26</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstantin\\_Chernenko](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstantin_Chernenko)

through the *partkom* committee, right?” He answered: “Yes, but why should you be concerned about that?” I said: “We just want to make sure that, if he is not accepted by the Department of Physics, we will still have enough time to have him reinstated in the Hydrometeorological Institute.”

A few days later he informed me that everything went pretty well. The session of the *partkom* committee took place five minutes before the session of the academic committee. When everything was done and over with I asked him: “How is it possible to pass him through the *partkom* committee where you have to mention that his name is Dima Kagan, that he is not a member of the Komsomol and all that stuff.” He said that unlike me the prorektor of correspondence and evening education at the university was very experienced in such matters. Since everything had been decided beforehand, when he appeared before the committee he said: “There are seven candidates for reinstatement. The Department of Physics supports five of them. All their documents are in order. Do I need to read them out one by one?” As you can guess, there was no such need. [*Both laugh*].

E. D. So he was reinstated and studied in the evening program of the Department of Physics.

A. K. Yes, he studied and continued working as a programmer. I think that in the last few years before our departure, he was doing pretty well. As I learned later, some credit for this must be given to the deputy director of the Steklov Institute, Faddeev. It appears that he was involved in resolving this matter. Later we also learned that Arno Penzias,<sup>27</sup> a famous American physicist, who together with Wilson<sup>28</sup> received the Nobel Prize in physics for discovering cosmic microwave radiation, having learned about my son’s difficulties, collected signatures of his colleagues in the American Institute of Physics and asked Faddeev to assist Dima to the extent that it was possible. Obviously, Faddeev has a fair amount of influence in the Department of Physics at the Leningrad State University. I believe that the decision to accept Dima to the evening program was a compromise solution reached as a result of a discussion between Faddeev and the Department of Physics.

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<sup>27</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arno\\_Allan\\_Penzias](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arno_Allan_Penzias)

<sup>28</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Woodrow\\_Wilson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Woodrow_Wilson)

## G. The Attitude of Faddeev

E. D. I think that you should tell a little bit more about Ludwig Dmitrievich and his attitude toward you during the time when you were refusenik. I think that future historians of science will benefit from that. Besides, it is all history at this point.

A. K. I agree with you. I already talked about his attitude in the early stages of my refusenik life, shortly after I applied for an exit visa, and in the later stages, when the mathematical community made its position on this matter clear. As you know, he is a very intelligent person and a very experienced public figure too. I don't think it would be appropriate to use the term 'politician' in relation to mathematics. He is an outstanding scholar of course. Apparently, as I heard from many people in the Institute, in the beginning he was angered by my decision to leave because he interpreted it as a reaction to his appointment as the Director of LOMI in place of Petrashen'. Needless to say, this was a misguided assumption. I would never have staked my career and my family's well-being just on that.

Now I am also of the opinion that the Institute, if they really wanted to, could have helped us to receive our exit visas earlier, at least in the very beginning. Perhaps, starting from 1982-3 when it became a matter of policy not to allow any scientists to leave the country, there was very little that the Institute could do. When I told Faddeev that I was finally granted permission to leave, he asked me when it was issued. I said that the only date that I know of was December 9. He said that the reason he was asking was because he knew that the Academy of Sciences had taken steps to expedite my application.

The part of the story that took place in 1987 is also interesting. When we saw that the government started allowing people to leave, we decided to take action. In January of 1987 we wrote a letter to OVIR, asking them to review our file on the grounds that we had been waiting for quite a while. We heard nothing back from them for a long time. Then suddenly in June they informed us that our application was rejected yet again because the Mathematical Institute refused to approve our departure. At this point I got very upset and sat down to write a letter to Faddeev. Did Dima mail a copy of that letter to you? If not, he made a huge mistake because, as Dima himself said, the letter possesses some literary value.



E. D. You can mail it to me yourself now.

A. K. Yes, I have a copy in Canada. I will certainly do that. The contents of the letter are as follows. I begin by saying that on June 12 the Leningrad OVIR informed us about the rejection of our application on the grounds that the Mathematical Institute objected to my departure. I wrote that even in our worst nightmares could we imagine that our ordeal would last so long. "This crosses every possible boundary," I wrote. "If not now, when?" I could have also added: "If not you, then who?"

E. D. [*Laughs*].

A. K. I sealed the letter and mailed it. Faddeev reacted immediately. On the day he received the letter he invited me to his office. With him was Lanin, scientific secretary for international affairs. "Is it what they told you?" asked Faddeev. I said: "It is exactly what they told me." He said: "But when Lanin went to the OVIR they told him that they told you something else." "No," I retorted, "this is exactly what they said." Anyhow, he promised me that the Institute would send a letter to the OVIR saying that it had no objections against my departure. I believe he made good on his promise and sent the formal letter to the OVIR, although I have never seen a copy of it.

In about a month – I believe it was July 11 or 12 – the Leningrad OVIR told us that they received a letter from LOMI removing all its objections to my departure. I said: "This implies that we are finally free to go, doesn't it?" "No," they said, "it does not necessarily mean that." "What does it mean then?" "It means that you have to submit all your documents all over again." Alright. As you probably understand, I was prepared for anything. We took the forms and filled them out. Dima had some problems because he was employed, and we didn't want to involve him at this point. But because we were convinced that our misfortunes were drawing to an end, we asked him to approach the director of human resources at his work. As is normally the case, the HR person said that he could not give Dima the paper he was asking for. We called the OVIR again. In short, this was a standard situation. All this person had to do was to verify that the contents of Dima's labor booklet<sup>29</sup> were correct. Myself, I decided not to do that. I simply brought my labor booklet to the OVIR and asked them to verify it. Everything seemed to be going just fine, because

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<sup>29</sup> In the Soviet Union every employee had an official personal document recording the employment status of its owner over time.

when I asked the HR person in the Institute to take my labor booklet for a couple of days, she gave it to me without any argument. She only asked me sign a brief statement that I took it. So I was under the impression that our application would be approved very soon. The OVIR told us that all our documents were in order, and that we should expect a formal response within a week. Mind you, when they say 'within a week' it usually means that they already have the answer. But then, to my utter surprise, inspector Leonova (whom I mentioned at the very outset) said: "You know, it may well happen so that all of your family members will get an exit visa except for you."

E. D. [*Laughs*].

A. K. "What are you talking about?!" said I in disbelief. "That would amount to a rejection for all of my family." Since I knew that the OVIR likes to play jokes of this kind, I didn't take her words very seriously at first. However, when we came back to receive our exit visas on August 25, there was no exit visa for me. I said: "Are you out of your mind?" She said: "Your case was forwarded to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, to the newly formed committee on the questions of citizenship." Nobody has ever seen this committee. Apparently, the names of its members are kept secret. When somebody tried to find out who the head of the committee was and where its sessions took place, they were told that the only way to reach it was by writing a letter.

We decided that our children should leave without us, although this new development caught me by surprise. I was absolutely unprepared for that. It seemed that all of us would get exit visas, especially considering the fact that the OVIR decided not to be very niggling when Sveta had some difficulty with verifying the record in her labor booklet. They said: "Fine, give us whatever you have." It was a very positive a sign.

So our children left the country, and I set about to write another batch of letters: to Faddeev, the Director of LOMI, and to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. Unlike my previous letter to Faddeev, these ones were of little literary value. At this time we started seeing more and more scientists from Leningrad receiving exit visas, and it was obvious to us that a happy end was near.

So this is more or less our story. It took about thirty minutes of tape and eleven long years of real life. You see, Evgeniy Borisovich, my story is in many ways unusual. However, looking at it from our current vantage point, we can see that a lot of refusenik scientists

who worked in the Research Institutes of the Academy of Sciences succeeded to keep their jobs.

E. D. Unlike those who worked in educational establishments.

A. K. Yes, unlike those who worked in universities, where they had no chance to continue working.

E. D. Take Freidlin for example.

A. K. Well, formally at least Freidlin resigned himself. Ioffe didn't resign himself but was transferred to a non-teaching job with lower salary. In Leningrad nobody with a teaching position would be able to keep their job even for a day. But, as you can see, the Academy was trying to help their own. Later I tried to find out who in the Academy of Sciences stood up for me so that I would be able to keep my job. As I heard here, Faddeev claimed all the credit for himself.

E. D. Is this what he said? It may not necessarily be true.

A. K. Obviously, I don't have to take his word for it. Some people say it may have been Kotelnikov,<sup>30</sup> who at the time was a vice president of the Academy and in charge of mathematics. I have no way to verify that. On the other hand, Faddeev once told me: "Do you really think that if the Director of LOMI really wants to fire somebody, he can't fire them?" I think that he can, but if the story is widely publicized that might be very difficult.

E. D. Besides, it would cost him a lot too. He has a reputation of someone who is not indifferent to public opinion abroad.

A. K. There is one question Americans often ask me: "When somebody tries to help a refusenik, how do you know if they are sincere or if they simply don't want to look bad?" Of course very often they are insincere, but thank God for their help, whatever their true motives may be. You see, Evgeniy Borisovich, there are truly decent people, like Petrashen', who tried to help when nobody cared about international public opinion.

E. D. He is a man of good conscience. Maybe he is religious. It may not be the case of course. People say that Smirnov<sup>31</sup> was very much like that.

A. K. Petrashen' was Smirnov's disciple, not only in math. He was in many ways similar to his teacher: first you need to help a person who is in trouble, and only then try to

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<sup>30</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir\\_Kotelnikov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Kotelnikov)

<sup>31</sup> <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Smirnov.html>

figure out what happened. The new generation is different. I don't think you can count on their sense decency and honesty.