

Why is it so hard for American academics to resist conforming?

by Lev Tsitrin



As an ex-Soviet, I always admire those who follow their own conscience, come what may. Needless to say, doing this in the Soviet Union was very risky – and yet there were people who did not hesitate to do so. Of course, we all heard of Sakharov. There were others, not as well-known in the West. A Soviet geneticist by the name of Joseph Rapoport publicly refused in 1948 to conform to the official party line that genetics was a “bourgeois pseudo-science” – and was kicked out of his research post and party membership for “refusing to recognize his mistakes.” After Stalin died and Khrushchev loosened ideological screws, it turned out that genetics did have a legitimate place in biology and, moreover, Rapoport’s

research made a major contribution to it. The Nobel committee sounded out the Soviet leadership, asking it it would be fine to award him the prize (after the scandal caused by awarding the prize to Pasternak for his *Doctor Zhivago*, they wanted to be careful). The party bosses wanted a Communist to get the prize, so Rapoport was told to re-apply for party membership. That idea did not sit too well with him, though. A highly decorated war hero (he was even awarded the American Legion of Merit for commanding the attack unit that broke through German defenses to meet the Americans on the Danube) who lost an eye in combat, he was nominated – three times – to the highest Soviet military honor, yet never got it because somehow, he always managed to cross his superiors. Highly abrasive whenever a question of honor was concerned, he yet again stood his grounds. “I did not quit the party, and I am not going to apply for readmission,” he said; “you expelled me, so accept me back if you want.” They wouldn’t, and the Nobel committee quietly dropped the nomination. Being what he was, Rapoport just did not mind it one bit.

Or how about another decorated war veteran, the famous Soviet writer Viktor Nekrasov, the author of the greatest Soviet war novel, “*In the Trenches of Stalingrad*”? On the 20th anniversary of Nazi destruction of Kiev Jewry in a ravine called Baby Yar, he attended its unofficial commemoration and, just out of spontaneous empathy, made a short speech saying that a monument must be erected on the site of the massacre, that it just can’t be that a place where tens of thousands of innocent people were shot dead, would not be marked by a memorial. (After the war, the ravine was used as a Kiev garbage dump; later on it was filled, with a recreational site put on top.) Outraged, Kiev party bosses demanded an explanation – to which he calmly replied that it were they who should have delivered his speech. He was kicked out of the party “for daring to have his own opinion” and, eventually, out of the country, spending the rest of his days in France. A fundamentally decent person brought up in a family of former

Russian aristocrats, he never repented, characteristically commenting "I would much rather die of nostalgia for my motherland than out of hate for her."

Even at the height of Stalin's terror there were people who refused to completely bend to his will. Needless to say, today's America is no USSR. The stakes for having one's own opinion are nowhere nearly as high. One does not have to be a decorated war hero to have the courage to stick to one's opinion; just a small modicum of integrity and decency should suffice. And yet somehow, many American academics seem eager to conform to a few loudmouths. How else to explain Professor A.J. Caschetta's recent report of the identical, cookie-cutter anti-Israel statements from American universities, "