

Writer Victor Sokolov

Stripped As Soviet Citizen, He Now Teaches At UCSC

By WALLACE WOOD

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"I'm a citizen of the world," grinned Victor Sokolov.

Sokolov became a man without a country on Sept. 7 when the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet stripped the 29-year-old writer of his citizenship in the Soviet Union.

He calls it "a high honor" to join only four other men in recent times to be stripped of Soviet citizenship: the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and writers Valery Chalidze, Zhenya Medvedev, and Vladimir Maximov.

"Obviously, for President Alexis Podgorny and the Presidium to take time from military planning and economic problems to strip me of citizenship must show how afraid they are of the truth," said Sokolov.

Sokolov has been a dissident Soviet writer, who left the Soviet Union a year ago after marrying an American woman, the former Barbara Wrahtz, in June of 1975.

He now teaches advanced Russian language at UCSC, and is a legal resident while he plans to seek American citizenship.

An interview with him at his university apartment is an eye-opener about the Soviet Union.

Sokolov pictures the Communist nation as ideologically bankrupt, and said the Russian people are using "passive resistance" against their government and its programs.

"Nobody works. That's why the breadbasket of Europe is now importing American grain. People drink constantly, and steal from their places of work. There is very little support for the Communist ideology, and even those in the Communist Party join to make a career."

The image of the Soviet Union as technologically advanced with its Soyuz spaceships and military hardware is a sham, Sokolov claims.

"Yes, we have advanced technology in the military, and in listening devices used by the KGB (equivalent to secret police). They use devices stamped "Made in U.S.A."

While the cities Moscow and Leningrad look prosperous to foreigners, a few miles outside of town there is still no running water, no inside plumbing, "though there is electricity."

Soviet leaders are "pathologically afraid" of the true situation getting out, and this is why, Sokolov thinks, they have branded him a traitor "for activities discrediting the rank (title) of a Soviet citizen."

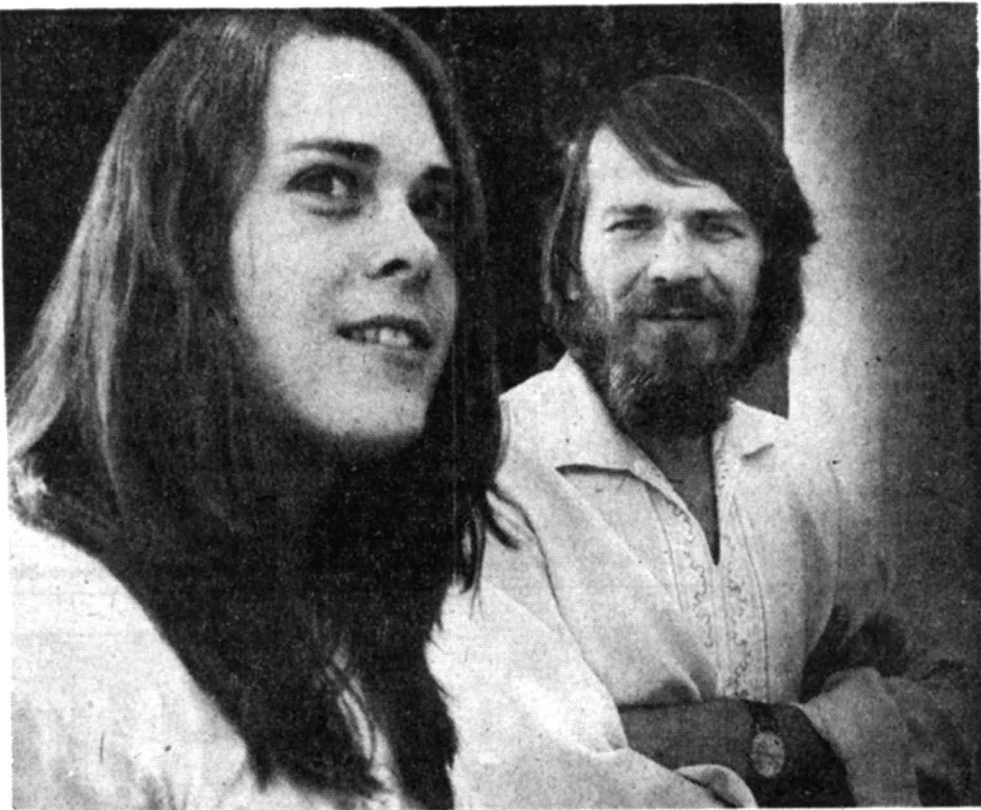
"I call this action of the Supreme Soviet rash because it is evident that I do not merit such a high honor. But I will strive to," he said in an open letter.

What bothers the people who live in the Soviet Union, according to Sokolov, is the absolute control the state has over their lives. "You are assigned a job, a place to live. If you work on a collective farm, you can't even go to Moscow for a weekend without obtaining a passport from the party secretary.

"There is no future, no choice in your own life. The whole country is spiritually depressed," Sokolov said.

"I'm not talking about freedom of ideas, that mean so much to the intelligentsia; just the basic freedoms to live your own lives."

This search for meaning in their existence has led many Soviet citizens back to religion—a move vigorously opposed by the state. "It is very illegal to have religious teaching. A young man, Argento, was



Writer Victor Sokolov, stripped of citizenship in the Soviet Union in September, now teaches at UCSC. He married his wife, Barbara, in June, 1975.

stuck in a madhouse for this. The churches that exist are only allowed to repeat liturgies and ceremonies. Father Dimitri, an Orthodox priest, spent eight years in a prison camp, and was kicked out of Moscow where he had his church. He opened a church about 80 kilometers outside Moscow, and people would make the long trip out there. So that church was closed, but there was so much protest from other nations he has been allowed to open another church about 40 kilometers from Moscow."

The West, especially America, has had enormous influence on younger citizens. The musical, "Jesus Christ, Superstar," generated intense interest in religion because of its combination of spirituality and rock music.

A pair of denim jeans from the West costs a month's wages, and is a symbol of affluence, not funk. "People have the money to buy them because there is nothing else to buy," he said.

Government control has led to tremendous red tape and inefficiency for the average citizen. As a result, Sokolov said, there is a tremendous black market for goods and services—not only for items from the West like jeans and records, but even for getting your plumbing fixed. "If your sink leaks, and you complain to the building superintendent, it may take three months. If you are willing to pay cash, you can get it fixed today."

There are even Soviet "hippies" who live much as American youth did in the 1960s, refusing to take jobs and smoking marijuana brought from the southern Soviet Union or "even grown in the planter boxes of Moscow during the summer."

Sokolov and his wife have not always been met with acceptance by the leftist-oriented students on campus.

He was very reluctant to criticize anything about the U.S., but when pressed finally, said that young people here "are basically O.K., but don't want to know all the facts. For them, what Mao (Tse Tsung) said is new, but it is what Stalin said 30 years ago. They think Trotsky was the true communist, but after Trotsky's exile, Stalin picked up Trotsky's ideas and used them.

"They talk of Marx, Marx, Marx. But they haven't read all of Marx. In the Soviet Union, no matter what field you go into, 45 per cent of your time in the schools and universities are spent on Marxism-Leninism.

"But I don't have the right to come to America and tell you where you are wrong when our own house (in the Soviet Union) is all messed up. What I want to show the West is that com-

munist is not the road to take, and the best way to show that is to write about what goes on in the Soviet Union."

Then, he said, Americans can judge for themselves.

Victor and Barbara met at a party in Moscow.

Barbara was a University of California graduate in Russian history, and had gone to Moscow to study Russian literature and improve her Russian.

After "an incredible amount of red tape," they were married in a Russian Orthodox church. Sokolov was an editor for a Soviet magazine before they met, and regularly published articles in the underground press, called the "Samizdat," or self-publishing press.

He has been writing for "Kontinent," a journal published in Paris. "Razgovor," another journal in Frankfurt, Germany, and "Russian Life," a small San Francisco daily published for Russian and Soviet emigres. He is not a poet, but a critic, and his sharp comments on Soviet life apparently triggered his loss of citizenship.

He is studying English at Santa Cruz High School, and though he is fast becoming proficient, his wife helped translate some points for this interview.

She has no Russian heritage, but began studying Russian history because she wanted to find out why we were so involved in the Cold War.

During his stint in the Soviet Army, Sokolov said the threat of imminent U.S. attack was drilled into the troops almost daily. Even today, the average Soviet citizen has trouble understanding the American acceptance of detente.

"Even though the people there are used to doublethink and know that what is officially criticized is often what is right, there is much lack of information and understanding about America."

This is because of the controlled flow of information, and there is "a real hunger for books," even more than a hunger for Western ideas. The official Soviet books are dull, and good books bring high prices.

One point Sokolov is very firm on: "too many people including the press, use the words 'Soviets' and 'Russian' as the same. The people of the Soviet Union are not the same as the Soviet government. They are very separate."