

## THE ERSHOV AFFAIR

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In May of 1980, a troublesome event occurred in the mathematics and logic community in the United States. Yuri Ershov, the brilliant young logician from Novosibirsk, was making a lecture tour of several universities, one of which was UC Berkeley. This visit, his first to America, was sponsored by the Fulbright Foundation. Of all the young logicians that Tarski had met during his 1966 stay in the former Soviet Union, Ershov had impressed him the most by his combination of mathematical talents (he had obtained important results in model theory, algebra, and the theory of computation) and personal liveliness. Stocky, athletic, convivial, and quick-witted, an enthusiastic vodka drinker with a good sense of humor — all these attributes appealed to Tarski. Stories were told of the boisterous drinking contests between Alfred and Yuri; in Ershov, Tarski had met his match. Since that time, in addition to his research achievements, the ambitious young Ershov had become a leading administrator in Soviet mathematical circles. After Mal'cev's death in 1967, he took charge of the seminar in algebra and logic in Novosibirsk, becoming director of the Mathematical Institute there and a corresponding member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Eventually, he would become rector of the University of Novosibirsk.

Like Mal'cev, Ershov was a member of the Communist Party — an essential step in the career of anyone wishing to rise in the echelons of power in the Soviet Union — and as such he followed the party line. Inevitably this led to his involvement in the widespread official and semi-official anti-Semitic practices that were well known in the academy. Evidence for this and its effects on Soviet mathematics came from a variety of sources, including reports of emigrés, visitors to the Soviet Union, and organizations of concerned scientists. Among these was a 1978 *samidat* essay by Grigori Freiman, “It Seems I Am a Jew,” and a report by emigré mathematicians entitled “The Situation in Soviet Mathematics.”<sup>1</sup> These articles documented the denial of admission of bright young Jewish mathematics students to universities, denial of advancement to graduate study for those who had passed the first hurdle, limitation on the publication of Jewish mathematicians' research in leading journals, limitation of invitations to Soviet conferences, impossibility of traveling to international conferences, rejection of Ph.D. theses, and, finally, rejection of the higher Doctor of Science thesis needed to secure a university chair.

Ershov was a member of the central committee (VAK) that made judgments as to the acceptability of dissertations for the Doctor of Science degree. Almost without exception, theses submitted to VAI by Jewish mathematicians, even when supported by leading non-Jews, were rejected; there were also other, more specific stories that were damaging. Thus, when Ershov came to the United States he was greeted with open hostility and protests by a significant number of — though by no means all — distinguished American mathematicians and logicians.

Ershov's first talk at UCLA went off without incident but, by the time he arrived in Berkeley, a movement had been mounted to boycott his lecture of May 9. A number of the leading logicians and mathematicians in Berkeley wrote an open

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From the book *Alfred Tarski. Life and Logic*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 363–365.

<sup>1</sup>Freiman (1980); the report “The Situation in Soviet Mathematics” is included as appendix.

letter to him protesting his “extraordinary role as one who consistently interferes with the careers of Soviet mathematicians for reasons having nothing to do with the character of their work.”

Terribly disturbed by the allegations and the impending boycott, Tarski invited Ershov to his home on the day before his lecture. As a friend and colleague, he wanted to hear his side of the story. Ershov firmly denied the accusations against him, but in the end Tarski, unsatisfied with his explanations, told him that he would not go to his lecture. Furthermore, despite his general principle of keeping politics and mathematics separate, he joined Leon Henkin, Julia and Raphael Robinson, John Kelley, Steven Smale, and a number of others in signing the letter of condemnation, which concluded: “Yuri Ershov, we protest that you dishonored our profession. For shame!”<sup>2</sup>

Only a few people attended Ershov’s lecture, and to do so they had to pass through a picket line that included a sign-carrying Julia Robinson. In the seminar room, a banner reading “We protest the presence of the anti-Semite Yuri Ershov” was displayed for a few moments before his talk. Two of Tarski’s closest colleagues, John Addison and Bob Vaught, did attend the lecture. Vaught felt a strong obligation to the guest speaker, whom he had invited on behalf of the group in logic and the methodology of science following its vote (by a narrow margin) in favor of the invitation. Terribly disturbed by the boycott, he resigned from the group in spite of Julia Robinson’s plea not to do so; she said that “our differences are minor compared to thirty years of friendship.”

As for Ershov, he continued to deny all complicity in anti-Semitic actions and wrote Tarski the day after his lecture, reiterating that the accusations were unproven and unjust: “As every man, I make mistakes but never in my activity was I guided by any racial or national prejudices whatever.”<sup>3</sup> Ershov had a few defenders at the University of Chicago, the next stop on his tour, where again he spoke to a very small audience amidst vociferous public disapproval. Saunders Mac Lane was among those who said the evidence against him was insufficient, but the following week — in Cambridge, Massachusetts — Willard Quine, Burton Dreben, Hilary Putnam, Aki Kanamori, Hartley Rogers, Sy Friedman, Richard Shore, and others signed a letter to Ershov that detailed reports of “a general pattern of misuse of your professional and academic position for political and anti-Semitic ends. . . . In the absence of convincing evidence [to the contrary] we cannot in good conscience offer you either our personal hospitality or professional collaboration.” In addition, most of these distinguished scholars were signatories of a letter scolding the Fulbright Foundation for selecting Ershov in the first place. The protest made sufficient noise for the *Boston Globe* to report on the affair.

These protests were a rare event in the mathematics and logic community, where under most circumstances politics is light years away from the abstract work in which scholars are immured. The brouhaha was particularly painful to Tarski — not only because of his affection and regard for Ershov but also because of his own experience in Poland, where anti-Semitism had hampered his career. Ironically, in a replication of Tarski’s experience, many of the Jewish mathematicians and logicians who were persecuted eventually made their way out of the Soviet Union to find opportunities in other countries that were far better than those in their native land.

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<sup>2</sup>Yuri Ershov visit report, Tarski Archives

<sup>3</sup>Yuri Ershov letter to Tarski, Tarski Archives