

How Things are Done in the Soviet Provinces

To the Editor:

I was extremely moved by a report obtained by your Moscow correspondent from a resident of the Russian city of Ryazan, Svetlana Shramko, to the effect that she had been committed to a mental hospital for having complained about air pollution by the Ryazan Artificial Fiber Plant. To be committed to a mental institution for defending the environment may seem an implausible figment of the imagination to the Western reader. But that is exactly, to the last detail, how things are done in the Soviet provinces.

The Artificial Fiber Plant was built in a suburb of Ryazan while I was still living there. It was built simply because the former party secretary of Ryazan Province, Aleksei Larionov, wanted to enhance his own standing in the party hierarchy.

After having built several such industrial plants, he produced a famed "meat explosion," trebling meat output by slaughtering all the livestock. He was exposed and committed suicide.

Something had to give in such unjustified and hasty economic development, and that was, of course, in the area of waste treatment. The fiber factory became a constant polluter of the environment.

One must realize the hopeless situation in the Soviet provinces, where even local decisions may not be challenged by the population. It is so dangerous to protest that it becomes

more sensible to bear all the deprivations, sufferings and pollution; at least one loses less by keeping silent.

It was in that morass of fear that Svetlana Shramko flashed like a spark of courage. She not only complained to the party's national Central Committee, but sent a copy to the United Nations—through the Soviet mail, which means, of course, straight to the K.G.B.

For this she was committed to a mental hospital at the end of June; she might never have emerged and no one would have known about her. But she found the will to put up a struggle: she was able to persuade her persecutors of her submissiveness, and was released Aug. 1 after having promised to write no more letters to international organizations. Soon thereafter she was able to place a telephone call to your correspondent, probably from Moscow. Such a call is suicidal for the ordinary Soviet citizen. With that call, Svetlana Shramko in effect sacrificed her life, out of concern for the hundreds of thousands around her and for the sake of our common planet.

I don't know what happened to her; most likely she was committed again and is being killed with "drugs." I am appealing to all not to forget or let anyone forget that courageous, self-denying woman. Let us not forget her; in other words let us not let her perish. The Soviet Government must answer to world public opinion for her life.

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

Zurich, Aug. 23, 1974