

A Tribute to Edward Kline (1932-2017)

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Ed Kline, who died in late June 2017 at age 85, was fond of quoting what his friend and colleague Valery Chalidze once said: “Quiet diplomacy works on occasion, but silence never works.”

Ed was a consummate practitioner of quiet diplomacy, and he was never silent. His many years of courageous but unheralded work in support of Andrei Sakharov, Elena Bonner, Anatoly Marchenko, Yurii Orlov, and others in the Soviet Union who struggled for human rights and democratic freedoms confirmed that quiet diplomacy does indeed “work on occasion.” The corollary, however, is that quiet diplomacy sometimes does not work, and indeed that was often the case when dealing with the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, even when Ed’s efforts were thwarted by the Soviet authorities, he never gave up. He remained a staunch, devoted friend and supporter of human rights activists in the USSR, above all Sakharov, helping to sustain them through decades of adversity.

Ed was a successful business executive in New York City in the 1960s when he first became keenly interested in supporting the fledgling Soviet human rights movement. Nowadays it is hard to convey to anyone under 35 what the Soviet Union was like in the years before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. In the 1960s, the prospects for liberalization and democratization in the USSR seemed almost non-existent. That remained the case until the late 1980s. When Soviet dissidents would furtively gather for dinners or meetings in the 1970s and 1980s, they would often end with a self-deprecating toast “To the success of our hopeless cause!”

Everyone involved with the Soviet human rights movement, including Ed, had no guarantee that anything they did would ever pay off. They struggled for human rights and freedom in the USSR not because they thought they would be successful but because they feared the consequences of keeping silent. They knew that the Soviet dictatorship would clamp down ever more harshly. The dissidents refused to stay silent, but their attempts to challenge the Soviet regime often seemed doomed to fail. The situation appeared especially bleak in the early 1980s after the Soviet authorities crushed the human rights movement, sending many dissidents to prison and exiling others (Sakharov and Bonner). But instead of giving up in despair, Ed continued to do everything he could to support Sakharov, Bonner, and the other human rights activists. He always did this behind the scenes, shunning the limelight and achieving immense results without drawing attention to himself.

After Gorbachev took office in 1985 and began implementing sweeping internal reforms, the situation for the human rights activists gradually turned around. Sakharov was released from internal exile in late 1986, and over the next few years he became a prominent figure in the USSR, even gaining election to the newly formed Congress of People’s Deputies in March 1989. By the time Sakharov died in December 1989, he was able to have much greater hope for the future of his country. Sakharov and Bonner visited Harvard’s Russian Research Center (now the Davis Center) in August 1989, just four months before Sakharov died. One of the things that struck me most about that visit was how attached Sakharov was to Ed. The two of them were like old teammates who had come through a lengthy, difficult contest and were nearing a victorious end. They still had work to do but could look back with satisfaction on what had been achieved.

After Sakharov died, Ed set up the Andrei Sakharov Foundation, which he headed for many years. The foundation remains a permanent tribute not only to Sakharov but to Ed’s valiant work on behalf of Soviet dissidents.

I first met Ed in the fall of 1986, when I was in my mid-20s and had just started as an assistant professor at

Harvard. Two of my colleagues at the Russian Research Center, Adam Ulam (the director) and Marshall Goldman (the associate director), asked me to join them for a meeting with Ed. We discussed the situation in the Soviet Union and the prospects for change under Gorbachev. The outlook at that early stage of the Gorbachev period was still highly uncertain, and Sakharov was still in exile. Another leading dissident, Anatoly Marchenko, had just embarked on a hunger strike in prison that eventually cost him his life. All of us were pessimistic that any move toward liberalization would be far-reaching or durable. Fortunately, though, our pessimism turned out to be unwarranted. Sakharov was soon released from exile, reforms in the USSR steadily accelerated, and the Soviet dictatorship started to come undone.

After the Soviet Union disintegrated in late 1991, Ed, like many others, hoped that true democracy would take hold in Russia. He was disappointed that it never did, but he at least could be satisfied that Russia, despite experiencing a return to authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin, has remained a much freer country than the Soviet Union was before the late 1980s.

Ed was an alumnus of Yale University, but he also has a solid presence at Harvard. He, along with Elena Bonner and Tatiana Yankelevich, was involved in the transfer of the Sakharov Archive to Harvard in 2004. Among the voluminous records in the Sakharov Archive are 22 boxes of Ed's own papers, which provide rich material for scholars. Anyone who looks through those papers will quickly see what an invaluable role Ed played in the Soviet human rights movement. He kept all his work quiet, but he was never silent in the face of injustice.