

Russ Won't Release UC Student to U.S.

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WASHINGTON — The Soviet Union appears to be provoking a confrontation with the United States over the fate of a 36 year old Russian exchange student at the University of California at Berkeley who attempted suicide, possibly in an effort to avoid being forced to return home.

Soviet officials here — in a sharply worded protest note — said they had no intention of relinquishing the student, Merab Kurashvily, for an interview with U.S. immigration officers in New York. The Soviet note accused the United States of "harassment that drove Kurashvily to this desperate act.

State Department officials bluntly responded to the note

by telling the Russians point-blank that "if he doesn't appear for the interview, he doesn't leave the country," spokesman Charles Bray disclosed.

(Kurashvily and Grigorii Smyely, also 36, were engaged in postdoctoral civil engineering studies at Berkeley. Both are associate professors of engineering at Soviet universities.

It also threatened to cast a shadow over an unprecedented exhibit of Soviet art treasures from the Kremlin Museum, the first such major exhibition in this year's U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange program, scheduled to open tonight at a formal diplomatic reception in Washington.

Shoplifting Dropped

(Last Wednesday the two
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were arrested on shoplifting charges in Berkeley. A Soviet consular official flew to Berkeley to consult with police and university officials and it was agreed that charges would be dropped.

(UC officials urged the two to remain here as students, but on Friday they were flown to Washington to explain "the facts" to the Soviet Embassy. They were being driven to the airport in New York, apparently for a flight to Russia, where Kurashvily made his suicide attempt.)

Washington sources confirmed that Kurashvily was still on the passenger list of an Aeroflot flight scheduled to depart for Moscow this afternoon.

The acrimonious U.S.-Soviet exchange appeared to raise the possibility that a showdown might take place at New York's Kennedy International Airport if the Russians actually try to put Kurashvily on the flight.

Berkeley Student

The Soviet Mission yesterday refused to produce the UC student for a scheduled hearing in U.S. district court in New York to determine whether he was seeking political asylum in the United States. A spokesman for the Soviet Mission asserted that Kurashvily was too ill to appear for the hearing.

Meanwhile these other developments in the Kurashvily case came to light:

• Soviet officials since last Thursday have refused to begin discussions with Alan Kassof, administrator of the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), who coincidentally is in Moscow to negotiate an agreement for next fall's exchange of graduate students between the two nations.

• The White House — apparently showing some irritation with State Department handling of the Kurashvily affair — urgently requested a memo of all details in the case be sent directly to Dr. Henry Kissinger, national security adviser to the President.

• State Department officials disclosed that the New York hospital, which released Kurashvily into the custody of the Soviet embassy personnel barely an hour after he underwent emergency treatment, failed to live up to an "understanding" not to relinquish the student before he had been interviewed by an appropriate U.S. official.

'Allowed to Stay'

Haunted by its previous foul-up when a Soviet Lithuanian seaman unsuccessfully tried to defect to the United States, State Department officials today vigorously assured newsmen that if Kurashvily makes known any desire to remain here, he will be allowed to do so.

Since being relinquished by the hospital to a Soviet physician and embassy official, Kurashvily has been hidden in the Soviet mission to the United Nations in New York.

Despite the tough stand taken today by the State Department, criticism continued of its actions in the initial critical hours of the incident. The criticism centered around the department's failure to stop the removal of Kurashvily from the hospital, even before a team of doctors had finished patching him up.

State Department officials maintained that they had no authority to compel the hospital to hold onto the student, particularly since he himself purportedly requested release into the custody of the Soviet physicians.

Kennedy Airport

Kurashvily cut his throat and wrists Sunday night in a small bus taking him to Kennedy Airport for an Aeroflot flight to Moscow. He was in the Soviet embassy vehicle with six other Russians, four of whom held diplomatic passports.

Kurashvily jumped from the van about six miles from the terminal, but was pulled back into the vehicle by the other riders. He was taken to the hospital only after airport security guards seized the bleeding student in the terminal a short time before his flight was scheduled to depart.

'Shoplifting? Incredible!'

The shoplifting charge which led to the strange current plight of Russian exchange student Merab Kurashvily is "incredible" to his friends at the University of California, one of them declared today.

Lucia Dunn, a graduate student in economics who lives at the International House on the Berkeley campus, met the Russian while he was a tenant there before moving to an apartment in mid-December.

She described him as "a person of high character — very honest and very friendly."

"Shoplifting is so out of character — so very unlike him," she declared. She thought his poor English might have led to a misunderstanding about the alleged shoplifting at the Park and Shop Market, 2655 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley.

"The whole thing is so incredible to us," she said. "It's so hard to believe, especially the shoplifting charge."

The market dropped the charge after an investigation.