

Yelena Bonner, Sakharov's Widow, Dead at 88

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Yelena Bonner addressing the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 2008. **Vincent Kessler**

BOSTON — Yelena Bonner, a rights activist and widow of Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov, has died, her daughter said Sunday. She was 88.

Bonner died of heart failure Saturday afternoon in Boston, according to her daughter, Tatiana Yankelevich. She had been hospitalized since Feb. 21, Yankelevich said.

Bonner grew famous through her marriage to Sakharov, the Soviet Union's leading dissident, but she carved out her own reputation as a tireless human rights campaigner in the face of relentless hostility from Soviet authorities.

Bonner and Sakharov's cramped, three-room apartment in Moscow was the unofficial headquarters of the Soviet dissident movement in the 1970s, and again in the late 1980s after they returned from internal exile in the city of Gorky.

Both suffered constant harassment, and Soviet officialdom regularly made caustic, personal

attacks against Bonner, accusing her of being a foreign agent who bullied her husband, the father of the Soviet atomic bomb, into turning against his country.

But the attacks only seemed to strengthen their resolve, and neither ever stopped calling for greater personal freedom for Soviet citizens despite the huge personal cost.

"I hope to live out my life until the end worthy of the Russian culture in which I've spent my life, of the Jewish and Armenian nationalities, and I am proud that mine has been the difficult lot and happy fate to be the wife and friend of academic Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov," Bonner wrote in her autobiography.

After Sakharov died in 1989, and the Soviet Union collapsed two years later, Bonner continued to champion human rights, but was less and less visible, and her health began to deteriorate. She had a long history of heart and eye problems and suffered heart attacks in 1995 and 1996.

Nonetheless, she edited her husband's memoirs, which were released in 1997, and still occasionally spoke out against President Boris Yeltsin's government, denouncing Russia's bungled war in Chechnya and the shortcomings of the country's young democracy.

In recent years, Bonner lent the weight of her voice to those opposing the leadership of Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer who has restored many of the Soviet-era powers of the security services. In March 2010, hers was the first signature on a petition calling for Putin to go.

In December, she sent a moving speech that was read at an opposition rally in Moscow in which she asks to be considered among those on the square: "Consider that I have come, again to save my homeland, although I cannot walk."

The tough-talking Bonner and her shy, physicist-philosopher husband met through their political activities, and were married in 1971, both for the second time. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975, assuring their international standing.

For nearly two decades they were the first couple of the dissident movement, confronting the Soviet state regardless of the consequences.

After Sakharov criticized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he was banished in 1980 to Gorky, now known as Nizhny Novgorod. Bonner was found guilty of slander against the state in 1984 and also sentenced to internal exile in Gorky. The couple shared an apartment across the street from the police station, and they were under constant scrutiny.

She detailed their plight, often with wit and irony, in a 1986 book, "Alone Together."

"Whenever the authorities did not like something, it was our car that suffered. Either two tires would be punctured, or a window smashed or smeared with glue. This was how we knew that we had done something bad by their standards."

Under Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, the couple was allowed to return to Moscow in 1986, and together they pressed ahead with their campaign until Sakharov's death.

Yelena Georgievna Bonner lived a turbulent life from her birth on Feb. 15, 1923, in Merv,

Turkmenistan. Her mother fled the hospital with newborn Yelena after being warned of an attack by Muslims hostile to the Communists.

Political turmoil displaced her again in 1937, when her father, an Armenian and a member of the party elite, was arrested in Moscow. He was shot the following year.

Her mother, a Jew and a government health worker, was also arrested and spent the next 17 years in labor camps and exile before being released.

Bonner and her younger brother, Alexei, went to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) to live with her grandmother.

After high school, Bonner joined the army as a nurse. Though angry over the fate of her parents, she volunteered "as a duty of the heart," according to an autobiography. At the front in 1941, she suffered head injuries in a shelling attack that left severe, lifelong eye problems.

After the war, she studied medicine and married a fellow student, Ivan Semyonov. They had two children, Tatiana and Alexei, but grew apart as she became more politically active. They divorced in 1965.

She became a pediatrician and wrote for magazines, radio and medical journals. Her circle of friends, mainly Moscow intellectuals, steadily expanded.

When the human rights movement in the Soviet Union gained momentum in the late 1960s, she was part of it, helping produce "The Chronicle of Current Events," which reported rights violations.

Her efforts made her a favorite target of Soviet journalist Nikolai Yakovlev, who portrayed her as a Zionist and CIA agent trying to undermine the Soviet system.

In a particularly nasty 1983 magazine article, Yakovlev accused her of imposing her sympathies on Sakharov, turning him against his children and his country and taking control of his finances.

Bonner said Yakovlev's writings led to "thousands of irate, malicious letters which we receive recommending Sakharov 'to repent,' 'divorce the Jewess' and 'to live by his own mind, not by Bonnerovsky.'"

The campaign also led to threats against Bonner's family, prompting Bonner's mother, son, daughter and two grandchildren to move to Boston in the late 1970s. Bonner herself was allowed to visit Boston for several months in the mid-1980s to receive medical treatment before returning to the Soviet Union.

Frequently ailing in recent years, she spent increasingly long periods with her family in Boston. But she continued to subject Russia and its leadership to withering criticism for human rights violations.

Bonner's remains will be cremated and eventually buried in Moscow's Vostryakovskoye Cemetery alongside her husband, mother and brothers, Yankelevich said.

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