

Interview with Fridrich Israilevich Karpelevich

September 11, 1989. Moscow, Hotel of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Part 2

E. Dynkin: Please, continue.

F. Karpelevich: Mother was the only person working in our family. Meanwhile my brother was a student at the medical school. He returned from the war handicapped. His disability was minor, but, nevertheless, it was a disability. He was a medical school student...

E.D.: How is he now? Is he successful?

F.K.: Yes, he is very successful. He is the head of the department of surgery in one of the Moscow hospitals.

E.D.: Is he a good surgeon?

F.K.: He is a pretty good surgeon. He is a trauma surgeon, so when somebody breaks a leg or an arm, God forbid, then he helps.

E.D.: I see.

F.K.: And my sister was still in school, she also had to be supported somehow.

E.D.: You were a little older than your peers, weren't you?

F.K.: Indeed, I am older than my peers. Because during the war I didn't leave Moscow. We didn't go anywhere, did not get evacuated. And schools in Moscow didn't work for two years. During the winters 41-42 and 42-43 there were no classes. There was only some external schooling.

E.D.: What did you do during that time? How old were you?

F.K.: I turned 14, and I went to work in a factory as a miller. And now I am (no jokes), a 4th degree miller. As they say, I have a profession.

E.D.: So in the worst case scenario...

F.K.: Yes, my feet are firmly on the ground. If something happens, I will go back to work at a milling machine.

E.D.: And sometimes this scenario seemed to be ...

F.K.: ...rather real... So, I worked for two years. And I acquired some skills, you know? I can fix an outlet, for example.

E.D.: Well, you didn't need to waste two years on a factory for this.

F.K.: I can do more complicated things as well. If I can get a milling machine, I can make a key!

E.D.: I have a little device that makes keys without any education. It simply copies one from another.

F.K.: So you have a device! But I can make it without a device, with my own hands. Well, none of this really matters.

E.D.: And how did you get interested in math?

F.K.: When the school resumed in Moscow, I entered seventh grade, if I am not mistaken. I graduated from school. During my school days, for whatever reason, math was the easiest for me. Somehow it was the most pleasant for me. In the tenth grade I started attending your school mathematical circle, and you know the rest of the story.

E.D.: I see. And how about your worker class heritage, are you really a working class descendant? Because it happened often that, for example, a son from a family of intellectuals had to pretend to be from the working class for some political reasons. Or are you a real working class descendant?

F.K.: I am not sure about my heritage; I simply don't know the details. I don't know who my grandfathers were. But my mother was from Kherson, and my father was a turner. And then he worked as a mechanic. However, I don't know who my maternal grandfather was, nor who my paternal grandfather was. I don't know my grandfathers.

E.D.: If you were never told about them, it is quite possible they were some sort of NEPmen.

F.K.: Not necessarily. My grandfathers were simply dead by that time, so why tell me about them? And my grandmother lived with us. My mother's grandmother, and my father's grandmother, wasn't too far either.

E.D.: Ok, now the second fact of your biography. I remember talking to Petrovsky¹ when you were graduating. We were walking around a gallery, and I was asking him to help with your admission to graduate school. ... Wait a minute, was your father arrested?

F.K.: My father was indeed arrested, but not for political reasons...

E.D.: Then why...

F.K.: ...He did some speculation with watches.

E.D.: Then why didn't you popularize this fact? Although authorities did not like Jews at that time, they never openly based their refusals by this fact. I was taking your situation very close to heart. My father was also in prison, by the way, and I had some major difficulties in life because of this. And I remember well that the main obstacle to accepting you to graduate school was that your father had been repressed. And you told me that, and told someone else as well, and we accepted this as an unfortunate fact of your life. So, I was discussing this with Petrovsky. I even remember his exact words: 'And when did this misfortune happen to him?' I think you had told me that it was in 1937 or 1938.

F.K.: No, you are mistaken. My father fought in the war. He was arrested after the war. For his speculation with watches.

E.D.: So, I think, it was good in the end for you that it was only for speculations with watches, and not the 58th article. But I didn't know that. I did not tell Petrovsky that. And this is very stupid, because, as you understand, in comparison to the 58-th article, everything else was taken as a trifling.

Ivan Georgievich Petrovsky was the Rector of Moscow State University since 1951 (a position roughly equivalent to that of the President of the University in the USA).