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About 13 years ago I started attending the Second School. Although it was a specialized math school, it offered excellent instruction in other subjects, such as literature and biology. I was lucky to have a young teacher of biology who taught us genetics, eugenics and other banned disciplines at the time when standard textbooks described the “cutting-edge” methods of comrade Lysenko¹ which harmonized with Marxist-Leninist ideology. After we had covered genetics, we moved on to eugenics, a science that deals with the improvement of hereditary qualities. I remember how one time we discussed the concept of crossing-over or race crossing. I can't say now what either of them means. When the teacher finished the class, Baril exclaimed with sarcasm: “Are we going to have practical exercises?”

Lectures on mathematics were accompanied by exercises. In these exercises each of three forms was divided into two groups, each of which was further divided into two subgroups. The leader of our group was Alexander Dmitrievich Wentzel.² He was an excellent teacher but extremely sarcastic. Whenever somebody made a mistake, he would say something like this: “Well, to understand why this is incorrect, it is sufficient to consider the following very simple example. Let us take a two-dimensional simplex, otherwise known as a triangle.” He would continue in the same spirit. These analyses were very instructive. I personally learned a lot from them.

As I said, we had very good teachers not only in math but in literature. Isaac Semyonovich Zbarski served as a teaching materials developer for the city department of education. He was a member of the Communist Party and expressed ideologically sound opinions. However, he knew literature really well and was a very intelligent and subtle man. He had the ability to communicate his passion for literature to his students. From his classes I remember the following fact about Lev Tolstoy's life. When he was young, he was a philanderer. He got very close to getting expelled from the Kazan University for poor academic performance. Isaac Semyonovich did not refrain from diverging from the official

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trofim_Lysenko

² Interview with him is a part of this collection.

interpretation of this fact. A standard Soviet textbook said: “Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy was not satisfied with the curriculum of the Kazan University, which is why he decided to drop out.” In fact, the Kazan University was one of the best institutions of higher education in Russia at that time. Lobachevsky³ worked there. Great chemists of the time worked there. The faculty of the Department of Oriental Languages and Cultures, where Tolstoy was enrolled, was very good. In Zbarski’s literature classes we studied not only the works of Sholokhov, Tolstoy, Turgenev, which were required by the curriculum, but also the poetry of Tsvetaeva, Mandelshtam, Gumilev, and Acmeist poets.

Two years after my graduation, when we were second-year students, at our reunion we started to reminisce about the school days and share all kinds of funny stories. The funniest story was about a prank war between Smagin and Zak. They were two friends who were in the same form but had falling out. As a result, they started playing pranks on each other. It all started when Smagin posted an ad saying that a visiting housekeeper was looking for a job and gave Zak’s phone number. After Zak received a number of calls from interested employers, he decided to retaliate. He posted an ad advertising an exchange of an apartment for a smaller one. Obviously, a flood of phone calls followed. In response, Zak subscribed Smagin to a medical journal entitled *Obstetrics and Gynecology*. In his turn, Smagin subscribed Zak to a communist newspaper in either Korean or Vietnamese.

Many years later (about ten years after graduation) the Second School ceased to exist because of the proliferation of free thinking within its walls. One of the accusations was that students participated in a seminar on Marina Tsvetaeva, whereas there was no seminar devoted to Svetlov.⁴ The principal was fired. Many teachers left. Subsequently I think that Isaac Semyonovich gave lectures on literature in a Pioneers Palace.⁵

After we graduated from the MSU, we went our separate ways. I and two of my school buddies, Yevstegneev and Kuznetsov, were hired by the CEMI⁶. Natanson also went there. Our friend Myatlev, after serving two years in the army, found a job in the MSU lab of statistical methods. He also decided to enroll into an evening graduate program. The only

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolai_Lobachevsky

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Arkadyevich_Svetlov

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pioneers_Palace

⁶ Central Economics and Mathematics Institute (<http://www.cemi.rssi.ru/>)

obstacle for him was the English language exam. He knew English nearly as well as he knew Korean, Chinese or Japanese. The English language exam normally consists of two parts: written translation from English to Russian followed by a number of questions testing listening comprehension. Yevstigneev, who knew English pretty well, was standing behind the door. As soon as Myatlev received a text for translation, he passed it on to Yevstigneev who quickly translated it and returned to Myatlev. All Myatlev had to do was to copy the translation into the exam book.

The listening comprehension part didn't go as well. Before the exam, Myatlev was instructed to respond "Yes, I do" to any questions starting with "Do you..." If, however, a question didn't start with these words, then he had to try to detect a familiar word. For example, if he heard the word "school", he had to respond: "I finished school in 1966." Armed with a few of such canned responses, Myatlev confidently went to take his exam. The classroom where the exam took place was used for German and French language exams too, and the proctor who didn't know any of these languages by accident gave him a text in German. He started reading the text as if it was English. The examiner was astounded and asked: "What foreign language did you study in school?" To which Myatlev responded: "I finished school in 1966." She decided not to question him any further. She asked if C would be enough. He answered "most certainly" and left extremely satisfied.