

# Nikita D. Vvedenskaya

Moscow  
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## Highlights

### A. My Father (Part 1, 0:00-14:00)

N. K. I know that my mother's father, my grandfather, was a pharmacist. My ancestors on my mother's side were clergymen.

E. D. You don't know personally any members of your family who are clergymen, do you?

N. V. I know that my mother's grandfather was a priest, but obviously I didn't meet him in person.

E. D. It's not entirely impossible [*laughs*].

N. V. In fact, both of her grandfathers were priests. As for my father, he was of humble origins, as you can guess based on his last name.

E. D. I think it sounds very much like a name of someone who belongs to religious orders.

N. V. It does. His father studied in a seminary and later in a medical school. After graduation he worked in Moscow. Then he moved to Tomsk, which may have helped his career. He started as a *privatdozent*.<sup>1</sup> He then advanced to become an extraordinary professor and later an ordinary professor. Eventually he attained the rank of the Actual Civil Councilor<sup>2</sup> and received hereditary nobility. In short, he managed to climb very high on the social ladder.

E. D. This means that you belong to nobility as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Private lecturer is a title conferred in some European university systems, especially in German-speaking countries, for someone who pursues an academic career and holds all formal qualifications (doctorate and habilitation) to become a tenured university professor. With respect to the level of academic achievement, the title compares to associate professor (North America) or senior lecturer (UK); however, the title is not connected to any salaried position.

<sup>2</sup> For a list of positions and ranks of Imperial Russia see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Table\\_of\\_Ranks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Table_of_Ranks).

N. V. Correct, although my nobility goes back only as far as my grandfather. On the other side of my dad's family his grandfather was Ukrainian. His last name was Yaschenko. My father liked to brag about the fact that his grandfather and my great-grandfather was a Ukrainian nationalist who published a grammar of the Ukrainian language and went to jail for that.

E. D. Legally speaking, was nobility passed on to male descendants only or to all children?

N. V. It extended to all children.

E. D. So you are a member of nobility in the true sense of the word.

N. V. Yes, but it is not old nobility, and therefore it does not command as much prestige. It is very interesting how different people choose to emphasize certain elements of their lineage while underplaying others. Talking about his ancestry my father never failed to mention that his grandfather was a deacon (not even a priest) whose wife was illiterate, and that his grandfather on his mother's side was a Ukrainian nationalist who published a Ukrainian grammar. My father's sister, on the other hand, always mentioned their grandmother on their mother's side who belonged to the Russian old nobility.

E. D. It appears that our common friend Wentzell<sup>3</sup> is also of noble lineage.

N. V. She (the grandmother) belonged to an old noble family of Tatar origins. I don't even remember their last name. But other than that it's safe to say that my father came from humble beginnings. His father was a *raznochinets*<sup>4</sup> who worked his way up to become a professor and was granted nobility through his own hard work and merit. My grandmother, on the other hand, grew up in a family of Russian-Ukrainian intellectuals and lawyers by name Yaschenko.

As a young man my dad was politically very active. He was a member of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party (SR).<sup>5</sup> He was also active in the student movement. When

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with him is part of this collection.

<sup>4</sup> Literally "persons of miscellaneous ranks". *Raznochintsy* were people who did not belong to any of the established social classes in the Russian Empire (nobles, merchants, burghers, craftsmen, peasantry, clergy).

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist-Revolutionary\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist-Revolutionary_Party)

Plehve<sup>6</sup> was the Minister of the Interior, my father was expelled from the Moscow University because of his participation in the student protests and had to go to Berlin to finish his studies.

E. D. At least he had such an opportunity. Those expelled in the times of comrade Stalin were not as lucky.

N. V. After all, he was a professor's son, which made the transfer much easier. He graduated and completed part of his residency requirement in Berlin.

E. D. The children of Soviet professors, if expelled, usually went to Vilnius, as in the case of Rokhlin, or to Yerevan, as in the case of Freidlin.<sup>7</sup>

N. V. My father's situation was completely different. As I understand, he also did some of his residency in Paris. Then he moved back to Moscow where he passed his final exam to become a practicing physician. He was drafted to the army and started his service in Brest-Litovsk. At the outbreak of WWI he was recruited into the operational forces.

He was a very active man. He was sociable and, I must say, quite handsome. Those who remember him always mention these two qualities. So when the war began, he served as a doctor in the Russian army. It is a curious fact that he served as a regiment doctor in the regiment which bore the brunt of the first German chemical attack in the Russian front. It was the third chemical attack in the entire history of mankind. At that time medical practitioners simply didn't know how to deal with the effects of chemical weapons on human body. They simply didn't understand that survivors of such attacks must be given a long recovery period. I remember his stories about how after regaining consciousness soldiers would get up, walk away, and die only because they were not given enough time to recover. He was a decorated veteran of WWI. He was awarded a number of medals, including one for his efforts in the aftermath of this first chemical attack.

Later, as an officer who was fluent in French, he joined the *Legion Russe*, the Russian expeditionary force dispatched to France after a series of failures of the French army. He fought in France for a long time. At one point he decided to quit being a doctor and became

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<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vyacheslav\\_von\\_Plehve](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vyacheslav_von_Plehve)

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with Freidlin form a part of this collection. See Vershik's interview regarding the case of Rokhlin's son.

a regular soldier. He was awarded the National Order of the Legion of Honor for his courage.<sup>8</sup> He suffered a number of chemical poisonings.

E. D. He must have been a relatively young man at that time, right?

N. V. He was born in 1887. He wasn't very young.

E. D. That means he was about twenty six, twenty seven years old. One can hardly call that "old".

N. V. No, certainly not. When the war was over, he and other members of the *Legion Russe* returned back to Russia, sailing across the Arctic Ocean and landing in Vladivostok, which at the time was controlled by the White Army<sup>9</sup> of Kolchak.<sup>10</sup> By the way, he was strongly opposed to Kolchak. I learned about this from one of his letters.

He thought that he had an obligation to continue serving as a doctor in the army. He had a lot of friends among the so called "White Czechs".<sup>11</sup> According to him, the Czechs were constantly involved in mutinies. Having friends among them, he always ran the risk of being arrested. One of his friends in the military headquarters helped him to move from Vladivostok to Tomsk. Tomsk was the city where he grew up because his father used to work there as a professor of medicine. There in Tomsk he started working as a physician in a hospital of the White Army.

E. D. In 1918 or 19?

N. V. It was around 1919 or 1920. I am not entirely sure. Incidentally, my mom worked in that hospital as an administrative assistant, after she had fled from the Red Army advance in the Ural.

E. D. And you said that as a child you couldn't understand why anyone would want to escape from the Red Army [*laughs*].

N. V. Yes. And so this was how they met and got married. In 1920 Tomsk fell to the Red Army that took over the hospital, and my dad became an officer of the Red Army. My dad was a good story teller who liked to put a comic spin on his stories. He used to tell us that when the Red Army took control of the hospital, he was assigned a sailor in the Red

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<sup>8</sup> The highest military award in France.

<sup>9</sup> The White Movement was a loose confederation of Anti-Communist forces who fought the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War (1917–1922).

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander\\_Kolchak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Kolchak)

<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czechoslovak\\_Legion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czechoslovak_Legion)

Army as a supervising commissar. One time he had to fill out a questionnaire where he had to disclose his political affiliation. Not having any prior experience in such matters, he wrote that he considered himself a SR.<sup>12</sup> According to him, the sailor told him: “You’re an idiot, Mit’ka!<sup>13</sup> You should never disclose this kind of information!” Luckily he didn’t suffer any repercussions on that occasion.

Soon afterwards he contracted typhoid fever with a number of serious complications. Because of his illness he decided to move south to Tashkent where food supplies were better. In addition, his sister already lived in Tashkent with her family. She was a railway track engineer. At that time it was uncommon for women to work in this profession.

My father got transferred on a temporary basis to a military hospital in Tashkent. My mom thought that they would not stay there for more than six months or a year at most. For many years she continued to think that they would eventually move back to Tomsk. They lived in Tashkent for a while. My dad’s sister and his younger brother also moved to Tashkent because it was easier to find food there.

After a while my father left the military hospital and started working in the city hospital as a surgeon, despite the fact that he started his medical career as an urologist. Then he transferred to urological clinic where he worked under Professor Pereshipkin. When Professor Pereshipkin passed away, he succeeded him as the Professor of urology clinic in Tashkent. He was very actively involved in organizing the air ambulance service in Central Asia. As far as I know, for many years most people in Central Asia who worked in this area were his students. For a long time he was also involved in setting up paramedic services in Central Asia.

E. D. What about his nobility? Did it haunt him?

N. V. No, it didn’t. But his former affiliation with the Socialist Revolutionary Party did. Around 1929-30, the Communist authorities decided that all former SRs residing in Tashkent must register themselves. In matters of politics my mother was more reasonable than my dad. She understood exactly what that meant. She was absolutely against my father disclosing his former political affiliation. But my dad liked showing off. He said: “I am

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<sup>12</sup> See n. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Diminutive of Dmitriy.

a SR, therefore I must register.” This is exactly what he did. Small wonder that early in 1931 he was arrested. He was extremely lucky though. Through his sister, Nadezhda, the relatives appealed for help to Yekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova (first wife of Maxim Gorkii),<sup>14</sup> who was the head of the Political Red Cross.<sup>15</sup> Peshkova helped lots of people. Nadezhda was married to Peshkova’s son. Peshkova sent a telegram to Tashkent in which she defended my father. As a result of her intervention, he was released. He spent a few months in jail, and after his release he looked incredibly frightened. One of my uncles observed that after this incident my father became extremely cautious.

I must say though that my father was a patriot who believed that it was his duty to serve Russia in his capacity as a doctor. Thank God he was never arrested again. When the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, his kneejerk reaction was to join the army as a volunteer. He was convinced that as a doctor he had a duty to serve his country. Yet again his sister Nadezhda helped him to get his application approved. In December 1942 he was headed for the front, while my mom and I stayed in Tashkent.

### **B. Family Friends: the Yegudins (Part 1, 14:20-20:00)**

N. V. As a child I was under a strong influence of the Yegudins. They were a couple of evacuees from Leningrad. They survived a harsh winter in the besieged Leningrad. In this ordeal they lost their baby daughter. At first they were evacuated to the Northern Caucasus. During the German advance in that region, many people were urged to leave together with the retreating Soviet forces. The Yegudins were Jewish. Fortunately, they knew that they could not stay. How they knew is in itself an interesting story. Gersh Isaakovich Yegudin used to work in a Technical Institute. One of his colleagues who had been recruited to the army happened to serve in the army intelligence unit. It turned out that when the Red Army recaptured the Crimea from the Germans he personally saw the trenches filled with bodies of executed people.

E. D. This was not the very beginning of the war, was it?

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<sup>14</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yekaterina\\_Peshkova](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yekaterina_Peshkova)

<sup>15</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political\\_Red\\_Cross](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_Red_Cross)

N. V. No, it wasn't. But, as you know, Soviet media didn't talk about the German atrocities against the Jews. So this person chanced to be in Pyategorsk before the German advance, and he told his former colleagues that they had to leave. "Yes, there is a risk of getting killed en route," he explained, "but if you stay when the Germans arrive you are almost sure to die." So the Yegudins, like many other people, left the city on foot. There was no transportation at all. On their way they witnessed some horrific things. At that time there were a lot of hospitals in the Caucasus region. One of them was a hospital that specialized in head injuries. Patients of this hospital were trying to leave as well, and many of them were simply dying on the road.

The Yegudins managed to reach Nalchik. From there they moved to Tashkent. We met them through our mutual acquaintances, and they ended up staying with us. We had two rooms, but we already knew that my dad was going to the army and decided to make some space for them. So the Yegudins, quite a young couple at that time, probably in their 30s, moved in with us. They instantly became our best friends.

E. D. What happened to them after the war?

N. V. They returned to Leningrad. Gersh Isaakovich recently passed away, but his wife, Yelena Felixovna, is still alive, and we maintain a very close relationship.<sup>16</sup>

E. D. What's her profession?

N. V. She is a philologist.<sup>17</sup>

E. D. And he?

N. V. He was a statistician. There was a time when Andrey Nikolaevich [Kolmogorov] was trying to get him hired by the Steklov Institute but failed because of the atmosphere of increasing anti-Semitism.

E. D. And so you grew up in Tashkent, right?

N. V. Yes, I did. When I was about 12-13 years old, my mom and the Yegudins started to explain to me what was going on in our country. From them I learned for the first time

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<sup>16</sup> Yelena Felixovna Puritz passed away in 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Puritz specialized in German literature. She worked in the Herzen University and later in the Leningrad University of Economics and Finance.

about the political trials of the 30s,<sup>18</sup> about the assassination of Kirov,<sup>19</sup> and a lot of other things.

E. D. Were you the only child?

N. V. Yes, I was the only child.

E. D. Did the Yegudins have kids?

N. V. No, not at that time. Their daughter was born later. She is considerably younger than I, but we are very close friends. It is an interesting fact that Yelena Felixovna and Pontryagin were friends since very young age.

E. D. She is not Jewish, I assume.

N. V. Of course she is. In his youth Pontryagin wasn't an anti-Semite at all. I discussed with him this subject.

E. D. If I am not mistaken he used to have a crush on Jewish girls. Do you know the story of Yudinson?

N. V. What about her?

E. D. He proposed to her.

N. V. Well, he also proposed to Yelena Felixovna and was quite insistent.

E. D. Which gives rise to a theory that his rampant anti-Semitism is a direct result of having been rejected by multiple Jewish women.

N. V. I am not sure about that. But anyhow Yelena Felixovna didn't want to marry him. It was she who introduced me to Pontryagin in Leningrad. I was still in high school. This is how I met Pontryagin, not through Mekhmat but through Yelena Felixovna, whom he loved and who was his close friend.

The Yegudins had a powerful impact on my education. It is thanks to them that I developed a very strong repugnance to anti-Semitism, although this kind of repugnance was characteristic of my mom and dad too. My parents were impeccable in this respect.

#### **D. Mathematical Circle in Tashkent (Part 1, 20:00-20:30)**

E. D. How did you end up in Mekhmat?

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<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moscow\\_Trials](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moscow_Trials)

<sup>19</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey\\_Kirov#Assassination\\_and\\_aftermath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey_Kirov#Assassination_and_aftermath)



N. V. I took the entrance exams.

E. D. Obviously you did (*laughs*). I mean why did you decide to go there?

N. V. You see, my mom wanted me to study in Russia. She didn't want me to stay in Central Asia. It was my parents' decision.

E. D. I understand, but for some reason you didn't choose medicine.

N. V. Until grade 7 I wanted to become a doctor. But then I joined a math circle hosted by the university. The circle was run by Domoriad.

E. D. I think he wrote a book at some point.

N. V. In Tashkent we had mathematical Olympiads, where I always took the first prize. This how I fell in love with math.

E. D. How old were you?

N. V. Around grades 8 and 9. I had no doubt in my mind as to what I wanted to study at the university. My parents weren't so sure whether I should go to Matmekh in Leningrad or to Mekhmat in Moscow. It was up to them to decide, but as for me I always wanted to be in Mekhmat.

E. D. They weren't against it, were they?

N. V. No, they were not. In fact, they wanted me to go to Moscow because that way I would be closer to home, and there would be no need to take connecting flights. This is how I ended up going to Mekhmat.

### **E. Mekhmat, Komsomol, and Anti-Semitism (Part 1, 21:00-25:27)**

E. D. You were in the same year with Berezin<sup>20</sup> and Yushkevich.<sup>21</sup>

N. V. Yes, this is correct. We have been friends starting from our freshman year. We had a nice group of close friends. By the end of that year I was also made friends with Volodya Uspensky, and this was largely thanks to you. I remember how one time we were planning to buy a birthday cake for you, and this is how I first met Uspensky. Volodya is such a nice person. You can become friends with him in an instant. Alik Berezin is very different in this respect. Even though we used to sit close to each other in class, it took us

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<sup>20</sup> See next section.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with him is part of this collection

quite a long time to develop our friendship. In the beginning we didn't even visit each other at home.

E. D. Then he became your Komsomol<sup>22</sup> leader, right?

N. V. In fact, he was a Komsorg.<sup>23</sup> He wasn't a Komsomol leader. This was during my second year, I believe.

E. D. Volodya Uspensky also used to be involved in Komsomol activities.

N. V. Really? I didn't know that.

E. D. I was a professor already or at the very least a docent, and he collected my Komsomol dues being the Komsomol secretary in the division of mathematics.<sup>24</sup>

N. V. Here is a very funny story. I remember how one time – I wasn't not yet a member of the Komsmol – I asked Volodya with some excitement and perplexity: "Why have you joined the Komsomol?" To which Volodya responded in a very formal way: "Obviously, because I wanted to be in the vanguard of the Soviet youth." His response shut me up right away [*laughs*]. If you ask a stupid question, be prepared to get a brusque response.

Another terrible story happened at the end of my freshman year. As I said, I wasn't even a member of the Komsomol yet, but Alik Berezin assigned me to prepare a report on cosmopolitanism<sup>25</sup> for one of the polit-information sessions in the department.<sup>26</sup> By that time I knew perfectly well what the term meant. It was such a torture for me but I didn't say no. My goal was to use only the stock phraseology of Soviet newspapers without a single phrase of my own. However, I remember that at one point I stumbled and uttered something of my own. The feeling of shame and horror overwhelmed me, and I remember this moment to this day. Somehow I convinced myself that I would not compromise my conscience if I used only the formulaic language of Soviet propaganda and that I would cross the line if I used my own words. Later I often reproached Alik for putting me in such a

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<sup>22</sup> The youth division of the Communist Party.

<sup>23</sup> Komsomol organizer.

<sup>24</sup> According to Vvedenskaya, he never was.

<sup>25</sup> The term cosmopolitan was essentially a Soviet euphemism for Jew. It was widely used during Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign in the end of the 40s and in the early 50s ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rootless\\_cosmopolitan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rootless_cosmopolitan)).

<sup>26</sup> From time to time people had to attend meetings ("polit-information" sessions) featuring lectures on political subjects based on recent newspapers.

difficult situation, to which he would respond: “Who else could I pick for this report?” This is obviously a lie, but what other excuse does he have? We were very different people back then.

The thing is that the campaign against these so-called cosmopolitans affected the Yegudins in a very bad way. Yelena Felixovna and many of her friends lost their jobs. So I was very well aware of what was going on. My worst suspicions were confirmed three years later when I met Sima Markish.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of my second year I finally decided to join the Komsomol. I always used to say that I joined it for three reasons. First, student life in Mekhmat seemed to be revolving around the Komsomol activities. Not being a member, I felt somewhat isolated and excluded. It wasn't a very nice feeling. I didn't like it. Second, as a freshman I lived with my aunt, whose husband was a despot in his family and a great proponent of obscurantism. In addition to that, he was opposed to the Soviet regime, but for all the wrong reasons. This annoyed me a lot, and I wanted to join the Komsomol to spite him. Finally, Dobrushin, who was my close friend at that time, told me that he could not respect a girl who was not a member of the Komsomol. That was the most important reason [*laughs*].

#### **F. Alik Berezin<sup>28</sup> (Part 1, 30:45-33:44)**

E. D. I visited Alik not long before my departure to the US. He invited me to his place in Matveyevskoye, where he lived with his mom.

N. V. You know, Alik lived a very difficult life. His mom started showing the symptoms of dementia very early on. She used to have hallucinations all the time. Alik was trying to share it with me many times, but I never believed him. I was telling him that he was talking nonsense. He took my remarks to heart and stopped bringing up the issue. Later, however, her loss of memory became very noticeable.

His mother's ailment caused him a lot of pain. He felt that he could not move out and leave her on her own. She neither got along with his first nor with his second wife. For this reason both of them had to live apart from their husband.

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Markish\\_Shimon](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Markish_Shimon)

<sup>28</sup> <http://homepages.spa.umn.edu/~shifman/Berezin/Foreword:Toc/Foreword.pdf>

E. D. I don't remember meeting his wife when I visited him in Matveyevskoe.

N. V. I know that when Alik's wife gave birth to their daughter they lived together for a while, but then she moved out. She had her own apartment, and Alik visited her there, all the while living with his mom because, as he said, he could not leave her, which was true. It was a very difficult and stressful arrangement, which every now and then caused him to escape from Moscow going on camping trips in various parts of the country. It was during one of these getaways that he travelled to Magadan region where he drowned. After Alik's death, his widow<sup>29</sup> took care of his mom and even tried to live with her for a while, but it didn't work out.

### **G. Pontryagin (Part 1, 34:07-39:45)**

N. V. I met Lev Semyonovich when I was still in high school. I was introduced to him by my close friends, the Yegudins. For a long time he used to be very close friend of Yelena Feliksovna Yegudina (Puritz). When I first met him, he asked me about my future plans and was very supportive of my desire to apply to Mekhmat.

When I was a student, I used to call him from time to time, and after a few years we established a very good and close relationship. I have to say that I knew his first wife, a very nice woman whose name was Tasya. After they divorced he lived with his mother, Tatyana Andreevna. He liked when people visited him, and he also wanted them to go for walks with him. And so when I was a graduate student I used to go on walks with him on a regular basis, once or twice a week.

E. D. What did you talk about?

N. V. We talked about all kinds of things. For example, we talked a lot about literature. As a corresponding member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences he received catalogues of forthcoming books, and he asked his friends (including myself) to mark the books that they thought were worth ordering. He ordered a lot of books and accumulated a very decent library. He liked to lend books to people and talk about them once they read

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<sup>29</sup> Elena Karpel, who currently lives with her daughter in France. She wrote an essay commemorating her husband which is entitled "The Last Journey" (<http://homepages.spa.umn.edu/~shifman/Berezin/Karpel/Karpel-Eng.pdf>).

them. So we talked about literature and about our common friends. We also talked about politics and, in particular, the discrimination of the Jews. I remember how he used to tell me: “Nikishka,<sup>30</sup> you talk about anti-Semitism because it affects your friends. This is epsilon. My friends are Russian peasants. The tragedy of the Russian peasantry is far more important to me.”

E. D. It is a very popular point of view these days.

N. V. He often expressed it. I heard it from him in this formulation in the late 40s and early 50s. His phrase “this is epsilon” is stuck in my mind.

E. D. Well, I guess he is right. It is hard to compare the loss of 6 million lives with the loss of 60 million lives.

N. V. I don’t think he referred to the plight of the Jewish people as a whole but to the situation of the Jewish intellectuals in Moscow and Leningrad.

Later, when he worked on ordinary differential equations, I attended his seminar, and sometimes we also talked about what was going on in that seminar.

E. D. Who was your graduate supervisor?

N. V. My supervisor was always Olga Arsenyevna.<sup>31</sup> At one time I toyed with the idea of abandoning partial differential equations and focusing on ordinary equations instead. But this never actually happened. I continued working on partial derivatives. The topic of my dissertation was convergence of a finite difference scheme to a nonlinear equation investigated at that time by Olya Oleinik. It was because I worked on this topic that I was introduced to Peter Lax,<sup>32</sup> who was visiting Moscow. You see, Lax didn’t prove convergence of a scheme he proposed. I managed to prove it and this was the topic of my dissertation.

## **H. After Mekhmat (Part 1, 42:55 – end)**

E. D. So what happened after Mekhmat? You finished it and were admitted to a PhD program, right?

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<sup>30</sup> Diminutive of Nikita.

<sup>31</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olga\\_Arsenievna\\_Oleinik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olga_Arsenievna_Oleinik)

<sup>32</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Lax](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Lax)

N. V. Yes, I was admitted without any difficulties. But wait, there is an interesting story behind that. In my first couple of years in Mekhmat I participated in Kronrod's<sup>33</sup> seminar. But then I stopped, and this was partly because I was involved in organizing math Olympiads. I vividly remember how angry Sasha Kronrod was with me for dropping out of his seminar. In an apparent attempt to spite me, he even told that I would become a copy of Krasnobaeva. [*Both laugh*]. I took it close to heart. She was our associate dean.

E. D. She was a rather cranky person.

N. V. Despite this incident, when I was at the end of my undergrad studies, he suggested that I work with him in TTL (Thermonuclear Target Laboratory of the Lebedev Physical Institute). It was a highly classified research institution. I accepted. At first everything went fine. I had to fill out some forms, which I did. Another big problem was that I wasn't a native Muscovite, and so I sought advice of other people, including Lev Semyonovich [Pontryagin].

Having carefully weighed all pros and cons, I decided to work with Kronrod. Kronrod brought me to the Institute and took me on a tour of the facilities. However, when I submitted my papers for the final clearance, I was rejected. I felt very disappointed. This was the end of my fifth year in Mekhmat.

At the same time Olya Oleinik suggested me to apply for a PhD program. I applied and started working with her. However, for a long time I couldn't understand why I was turned down by TTL.

E. D. Yes, this is quite a mystery. After all, you aren't even Jewish.

N. V. Later, Kronrod told me that the rejection was due to a very poor character reference from Mekhmat. The reference stated that I didn't take a sufficiently active part in the public life of the faculty. To this day I don't know who ratted me out like that. At first I was sad, but now I am thankful that I never got hired by that lab.

So instead of TTL, I was admitted to a PhD program in the Steklov Institute in Leningrad. I remember how Izrail Moiseevich [Gelfand] once asked me about my ethnic background, to which I responded: "Izrail Moiseevich, I got my graduate degree from Steklovka." He immediately calmed down.

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<sup>33</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander\\_Kronrod](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Kronrod)

When I finished my degree in Steklovka, I was looking for a job. My adviser suggested that I apply to what was then called IAM (Institute of Applied Mathematics) where one department was headed by Konstantin Ivanovich [Babenko]. He was one of the opponents in my defence. He didn't like my dissertation too much, and I think that by and large he was right. He wrote a rather lukewarm review.

Nevertheless he gave me a job. For a while I didn't feel comfortable there and couldn't get into the groove. It took me two years to warm up. But then Babenko pitched me a problem. I started working on it, and soon became very much fascinated with my job.

E. D. There were many other people aside from Babenko. Did you communicate with any of them?

N. V. At first I communicated mostly with Sergei Godunov.<sup>34</sup> But then he left.

E. D. So far as I know, he is a very remarkable person.

N. V. Yes, his story is a very interesting one. He is a remarkable person and an amazing mathematician. I think he was born to be an applied mathematician.

E. D. I remember him when he was very young. When he was in his second year and I was in my fifth, he was one of my two assistants at a mathematical circle for high school students.

### **I. Kolya Chencov (Part 2, 1:17-3:00)**

E. D. What do you know about Kolya Chencov? Do you know him at all?

N. V. I know him very well. He always worked in the Institute of Applied Mathematics. He was very loyal to the Institute. For a long time he served as a Scientific Secretary and was very good at this job. He worked in the department of Izrail Moiseevich [Gelfand]. Somehow it was clear that he was keen on having an administrative career. For many years he tried to become a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences but was having a hard time getting elected. He just couldn't get enough votes. Now that Konstantin Ivanovich passed away, his department elected Kolya as its head. Although the department focuses on hydrodynamics, and it's been a long time since Kolya worked in this

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<sup>34</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergei\\_K.\\_Godunov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergei_K._Godunov)

field, they decided that he is the best candidate for the job. So they elected him as their head, because he is a decent person who knows people in the department and, just like Babenko, knows how to appreciate their work. They hope that, with him as the head of the department, they will continue working in the same way as under Babenko. It is of course very difficult to emulate Babenko, because he had a very bright personality and very clearly defined areas of interest in mathematics. Anyhow, Nikolai Nikolayevich Chencov is now the head of a department in the Institute of Applied Mathematics and he is very good in this capacity.

E. D. During one of my visits to Moscow, he showed up to my talk and made a very shrewd comment on my paper. Later, so far as I understand, he was for the most part busy building his summer house.

N. V. Yes, I wanted to invite him to our meeting<sup>35</sup> but he said that he was too busy working on this house.

### **J. Kolmogorov (Part 2, 17:20 – end)**

E. D. What do you know about Kolmogorov's last years?

N. V. He was in a very difficult condition, but his condition fluctuated. There were weeks and months when he felt great.

E. D. And this continued for many years, right?

N. V. Yes, but every year he was getting worse and worse. Everyone thinks that his condition began to deteriorate after he got hit by a door. Do you know this story?

E. D. No, I don't. Please tell.

N. V. As Volodya Uspensky says, everything started with *the* door.

E. D. Which door? The door of the MSU? I only remember the joke which said that the heavy door of the university was designed to identify those faculty members who must retire. If a professor can open the door, he is still fit for the job.

N. V. Unfortunately for Andrey Nikolayevich, the joke became a reality. It is not entirely clear what happened. It is likely that the door hit him when he fainted. Nobody

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<sup>35</sup> See "Party at the home of Nikita Vvedenskaya September 16, 1989" on this website.



knows exactly what happened. Maybe he was hit by the door as he fainted or maybe he fainted because he was hit by the door. He was very sick after this incident, and his Parkinson's first appears around this time.

E. D. When I interviewed Shiryaev, he told me how he and Tikhomirov were sorting through Kolmogorov's archive and how they discovered a lot of interesting notes.

N. V. Yes, including Kolmogorov's detailed plans of what he had to accomplish in his life and how much time he needed to spend on achieving each goal. The most amazing thing is that his career played out exactly in accordance with these plans.

E. D. I have never heard about that. He Shiryaev also told me another interesting story, namely, the story about Kolmogorov's role in the Luzin affair<sup>36</sup> and how the president of the Academy discussed the whole thing with Stalin. Do you know about that?

N. V. Yes, I do. So, to get back to his Parkinson's, the disease was very mild at first but then started to progress quickly. He didn't have the tremor associated Parkinson's but he often had a difficulty moving and talking.

E. D. Did you meet him at that time?

N. V. Yes, many times. He was still able to walk. He was coming to Mekhmat and was giving talks. It was a sad sight though. He lost his vision almost entirely and needed other people to help him move around. His students -- and above all Tikhomirov -- took very good care of him. Tikhomirov was Kolmogorov's close friend. They spent a lot of time together. At first Tikhomirov visited Kolmogorov in Komarovka and later moved to live there. In the last years of Kolmogorov's life Tikhomirov lived in Komarovka with his whole family.

E. D. Does he have a big family?

N. V. His wife, two kids, and his mom. All of them lived in Komarovka in the summer.

E. D. He seems like very nice person. I used to know him when he was a student and I was very delighted to meet him again after all these many years.

N. V. Yes, he is an exceptionally nice person. He was very much devoted to Kolmogorov and almost idolized him. They were spending a lot of time together, and Tikhomirov schedule his whole life around taking care of Kolmogorov. Sometimes he

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<sup>36</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolai\\_Luzin#The\\_Luzin\\_affair\\_of\\_1936](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolai_Luzin#The_Luzin_affair_of_1936)

would tell very touching stories. When Kolmogorov wanted to swim but was no longer able to, Tikhomirov used to take him to the river in a wheelbarrow. When his condition became very bad, Tikhomirov and other students of Kolmogorov organized rotating shifts to look after him. This arrangement lasted for a few years, and every day there was somebody around him at all times. They talked to him, helped him move around, and read books out loud. Many of his younger students – Tikhomirov, Shiryaev, Uspensky, Arnold – took part in this. Also, somebody always stayed with him at night because Andrey Nikolaevich had a difficulty turning around.

E. D. Couldn't they use the help of medical personnel?

N. V. They did, but they were not always available. Moreover, Anna Dmitrievna [Kolmogorov's wife] wasn't very good in organizing everything. Kolmogorov's students mentioned that Anna Dmitrievna had certain difficulty to be in control of the situation.

E. D. Which I can totally understand because she was very sick too.

N. V. Yes, she had terrible back aches. You may remember that she was a woman with a very graceful upright posture, but toward the end of her life she became bent over almost 90 degrees.

E. D. She didn't live long after her husband's death.

N. V. About a year or so. She obviously couldn't give her husband all the care that he needed. Moreover, as it often happens between elderly people, they used to butt heads about all kinds of trivial things. So most of the work fell on the shoulders of Kolmogorov's students, in particular Tikhomirov and Shirayev. Shiryaev was very good in handling things around the house, whereas Tikhomirov was good at providing much needed human interaction. Although these two were the main source of help for Kolmogorov, others were actively involved as well. Sometimes I would call Volodya Uspensky, and he would be on his shift in Komarovka.

E. D. I know that the last talk of Kolmogorov was presented by Volodya Uspensky. I don't know to what extent Kolmogorov was involved in writing it.

N. V. His students say that he was capable of dictating his thoughts for quite a long time. He had a hard time articulating them. Sometimes it would take a minute or two for each word to come out, but they were very patient listening, writing down, and repeating to

him what he dictated. One could say they helped him to live. What they did for him was absolutely incredible.

E. D. So what's going on with Kolmogorov's house in Komarovka?

N. V. I know that it has been decided that Shiryaev will be in charge of the house. I think that Anna Dmitrievna bequeathed it to him.

E. D. Yes, Kolmogorov's part. But what about Alexandrov's part?

N. V. Alexandrov wanted his part to be sold and the proceeds given to one of his students.

E. D. Based on what I heard from Shiryaev, this person is Schepin.

N. V. Probably. I am not privy to all the details.

E. D. Obviously. This whole arrangement has never been widely publicized.

N. V. The whole thing is still in progress. I know that Shiryaev started renovating the house. He wants to use some rooms for Kolmogorov's museum and others for hosting people.

E. D. One could organize an international research center there.

N. V. I think so too. They need to turn it into a research center and invite foreign researchers who want participate in this project. That way it will be a worthwhile undertaking. You have to keep in mind that the house is far from the city. Someone has to be in charge of this center managing its day-to-day operations: cleaning, repairs etc. I know that Shiryaev is in charge, but you cannot expect him to do everything.

E. D. They need to hire people, but to do that they need money.

N. V. Exactly. So to be successful in this undertaking, they need to find a way to generate money from this project. Alik Shiryaev is one of the few people who is capable of doing that. The question is rather "Does he want to do that?" I have no answer to that. There is a council of Kolmogorov's students which decides on anything that has to do with the house. It is very hard to predict what this venerable assembly will decree on this matter.