THE LAST JOURNEY *


REMEMBERING F. A. BEREZIN

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I do not know if it is right to agree to this recollection: memoirs of widows always seem to me a deficient genre, provoking the readers to seek a subtext, concealing the evidence of accounts, etc. In addition to this, the discussion here involves a person who was deeply private, whose soul was somewhat unusually sensitive, vulnerable, without skin, and therefore protected itself with secretiveness. I would have to compare it with an oyster – a delicate body hiding behind thick, externally rough, tightly closing shutters. If the shutters are open, this means that the oyster is dead. And here stands the moral question – have I the right to reveal what was trusted to me? But people want to know what kind of a person hid behind this great scientist. It is likely that History has a right to this. And here, so as not to desecrate the memory, half-truths are inadequate, because half truth for him was more unbearable than open lies.

One can hope that twenty five years is enough time for me to reflect and make my recollections just a little bit distant, elevated to that space where they belong not only to me. One thing that has not changed over the course of a quarter century: all memories return to that wicked day of July 14, 1980.

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Beginning of the End

This was my last working day before vacation. As usual, my colleagues (I worked at the A. V. Vishnevskii Institute of Surgery), organized a sendoff for me. The nurse Olga brought her crowned cake with whipped cream; we sat around, chatted, and had a spot of tea. In a wonderful mood, I left home to pack my bags.

I recall my thoughts: “How well everything is planned and organized this year.” We had plans to spend that summer in the Ukraine where we had already rented a house in a hamlet and sent the deposit. Alik’s vacation was a month longer than mine as he worked at Moscow State University (Alik – that’s how Felix Alexandrovich Berezin was called by his family and friends). Therefore, we succeeded in arranging for our parents to go with Natasha for the month of June to the Riga seashore, so that Alik could go to the Far East for a month where he could walk through the taiga as he had dreamed of doing for a long time. And, finally, the next day, he would fly in, and we would go to Riga to get our daughter and travel south with her. But a note was stuck in the doors of the apartment: “You have a telegram – come to the post office immediately.” It was too late to go and I simply felt lazy. I called the office and asked the clerk to read me the telegram.

“I just don’t know how to read it to you,” said the clerk. “Maybe it would be better to come?”

“What can it be? Read it, and that’ll be it. This is a message from my husband who is returning from vacation. It is surprising that he is so responsible this time.”

“But no, dear, he is not returning. Rather, you’ll have to fly to him...”

“But what is it?” And she read: “We regret to inform you ... tragically died...”

It was all over. My life had shattered...

In the first moment of shock, one feels no pain. There forms some sort of strange emptiness, and in this emptiness, I had a mission. I called my friend Galya Poliak.

“I need money. A lot.”

“You got me at the right time,” laughed Galya: “Borya and I
have exactly three rubles until the next paycheck.”

“Take it from the Old Man” – as Borya’s father, who lived with them, came to be called.

“Lyalya, have you fallen off the stove? You know that I never take a kopek from the parents” – and immediately without a pause – “Did something happen?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

It was impossible to say it. Until the words were spoken, it seemed like nothing had happened. To say it was as if to betray. I was silent.

“Related to Alik?” asked Galya curtly.

“Yes.”

“Is he alive?” Galya knew what she was asking. It would not have been the first time that friends had died in these damned expeditions.

“No.”

“Do not move. I will come immediately. I will bring everything. And you drink some vodka.”

“I don’t have any vodka.”

“I will bring some. In the meantime, make yourself some tea with lemon.”

“I do not want any tea.”

“Can you make some good strong tea for me? And gather things for the road.” Galya was great. The scariest thing is to be without purpose or action. When something falls on you, taking away your breath, it seems that you will suffocate in pain momentarily. And any activity distracts you, leads you to the side. Galya did not come alone but with my friend, Lyonya Nevler, along with his wife. I asked why. They said something like, “When a person is in pain, they have to be surrounded by people, and the more the better.” What was the difference? Around me was an impenetrable emptiness.

Galya poured a pile of money on the table. And I mean a mound. Because the Old Man kept money in a savings bank, and I planned to fly at dawn on the first flight, she ran around to all the neighbors in her tenement and borrowed money against the Old Man’s savings, thereby collecting all of the cash necessary. Aside from the large bills, there were crumpled up 10s, 5s 3s, but I do not recall any
Elena Karpel

singles. Filling me up with vodka and tea, I was laid to sleep. Lyonya remained on guard. In the morning, joined by Galya, we went to Domodedovo.

In the airport we were attended to with sincere understanding, taken through everything without having to stand in line, and told that they would send me off on the first flight, placing me in the service sector since there were no free seats. And only in the last moment when I paid the money for the ticket, did the cashier suddenly say to me, “Give me the telegram.”

“Which telegram?”

“Well, the one from Magadan, which reports your husband’s death.”

“But I do not have that telegram, since I did not go to the post office.”

“Without a verification document, we do not sell tickets. Magadan is a restricted zone. You not only need the telegram, but it also has to be officially certified.”

“Certified how? Why?”

“Because it is easy to forge a telegram... Who knows who would want to go there...” “People do not usually go to these places willingly,” Lyonya tried to intervene, “Usually people are sent to these places against their will.”

“Comrade, I feel for your grief, but remember that I am acting in your interests. Even if I violated the regulations and sold you a ticket, in Magadan your friend would not be released from the airport but in the best case scenario, would immediately be sent back to Moscow. Otherwise, they would hold her in a detention cell while her documents are verified. And I am not even saying that for a professional mistake like that I could receive a reprimand from the Party bureau.”

“The law is the law,” so we went back to the city.

Today Domodedovo is a first-class international airport served by a luxurious electric train, which will take you almost from the runway of the airport to the newly restored, elegant Paveletskii train station in forty minutes. But back then ... then one had to drag oneself to the train station, and then travel in a rickety commuter train an
hour and a half to the city. That part of my being which retained
some ability to understand felt sorry for Galya and Lyonya, who had
to fiddle with me for so long, but I myself was unable to feel these
stupid, lengthy journeys. Time seemed to stop ... no, it has stopped.
“Life is eternity, eternity is an instant” – in certain situations this is
not a poetic metaphor, but pure reality.

Everything was like a dream: for some reason, we went not to
my local post office but elsewhere, where there was some sort of an
office where, supposedly, they registered all telegrams which came
to Moscow. I was seated in a spacious hall, multitudes of people
were passing back and forth, Galya and Lyonya were running around
somewhere arranging something. Finally, we received the necessary
paperwork and we went back.

I flew out on the evening flight.

**Moscow – Krasnoyarsk**

I do not know how it is now, but then a flight to Magadan took ten
hours with one midpoint layover. The plane was packed to the brim.
Because there were not enough seats, some young people, happy,
youthful tourists flying to Krasnoyarsk, tossed down their backpacks
near the entrance and situated themselves on top of them and, the
entire way, sang and played the guitar.

“I am chasing, I’m chasing mists from the Arctic
And the t’áiga’s fragrance rain-imbued”
sang the youths in the aisle.¹

And I was traveling for a body – the body of Alik.

** * * ***

How did we meet? This was nine years before that day, on New
Year’s Eve. It is just unbelievable that this occurred nine years ago...
A posse of mathematicians, based on a long-established tradition,
left Moscow for the winter break at that time, to the hotel outside

¹The refrain from a popular song of Alexandra Pakhmutova, reputedly Brezhnev’s fa-
vorite composer. Her Komsomol songs were wide-spread in the 1970s and 80s. Translated
by Prof. A. Liberman. – Editor’s note
of Kalinin. Galya invited me to go with them. I felt shy: they were all smart and had known each other for a hundred years; therefore, I thought I would feel greatly out of place. But my girlfriend did not want to give in and, so as to entice me somehow, began to relate to me in great detail about everyone who was coming. Her description of Alik, I recall, included: “Don’t even look at this frozen professor, since you won’t thaw him.” But how could I even think of flirting as I was more concerned about not embarrassing myself!

When we arrived at the hotel, those friends who had arrived earlier all poured out to greet us. A loud group of ten people all congregated in the lobby. At the side there appeared a man with a beautiful grey head of hair and a pale thin face. At first I didn’t even understand that he also belonged to our company. It appeared to me that we blocked his path and did not permit him to pass. Much later, I came to find out that this was a very characteristic posture for Alik – to be together with everybody and at the same time, separate. Then out of the crowd swam Galya: “Meet Alik. And this is my friend Elena, also known as Lyalya.” We greeted each other, and I noted with surprise how the pupils of his blue eyes swiftly dilated. The eyes became almost black. I also thought, “What a lively reaction in this frozen professor.”

The next morning, the entire company went off to go skiing. Galya perpetually made fun of me, saying, “Lyalya does not ski, Lyalya just stands on skis.” Unfortunately, in this joke lay a dose of truth, coming close to being absolute. So as not to be a bother, I did not go with them and remained to walk around the hotel. There, as if out of the blue, appeared Alik who suggested we ski together.

“It will not work, as I ski slowly.”

“It’s OK – today I also am not disposed to break any records.”

The whole situation ended with him getting cold and, so as to warm up, he began to run away from me at a quick pace some fifty meters, and then, just as briskly, run back towards me. Like this, he ran back and forth until the return of the whole group from skiing, all of whom were greatly surprised with the marvel. When all was revealed, there was no end to the jokes.

After several days, we were all returning to Moscow. Right before
the breakup of the party, already in the subway, Alik suddenly said, “I will give you my telephone number. Call me sometime.”

Such an inflexion (now I understand that it came from shyness) was not at all satisfactory to me.

“You know, I, of course, am for the equal rights of gender. But at the same time, I prefer that the initiative comes from the male. If you are in the mood, call me yourself.”

“I do not have anything to write down your number – I am afraid I’ll forget.”

“Well, if you’d want, you will find a method to contact me.”

And with that, we parted. Quite some time passed. Suddenly, our secretary came into the experimental surgery room, saying, “Elena Grigorevna, can I interrupt? Someone has been trying to reach you all day long.”

I ran to the telephone, and Alik was on the line. “I have two tickets to the conservatory today. Do you want to go?”

I was surprised, elated, and confused. Our group at that time was developing a method for heart transplants and operations were very long. Furthermore, after their completion, and having to walk the dogs, sometimes we even stayed all night.

“I have a long experiment, and I absolutely do not know when I will be free. It’s a shame, but I am afraid I might stand you up.”

At that time, I did not know that Alik understood this in the best light: A person involved in her studies – that is what he valued!

“It’s OK. You will not stand me up. I will leave the ticket with the receptionist. What is your last name?”

“Karpel,” I said.

A strange silence in the receiver ensued. Only later I found out that my last name sounded almost like the last name of Alik’s previous wife, “Karpova.” This was a weird coincidence.

The dog quickly died, and I made it to the conservatory.

We started dating. It happened sort of like this. He called once a week and invited me to walk outside the city. On returning home, full of despair and physical exhaustion, I cried on the telephone to Galya: “We walked the entire day, fell into the swamp, then climbed through shrubbery, dusty spider webs filled my nostrils and blinded
my eyes, and on top of everything, I had to converse on intelligent subjects! And I was such a fool, such a fool! That’s it, he will never call me again!”

“Well, of course, poor Alik has no one to converse with. He invites you exclusively for philosophical debate!” laughed Galya.

Up to then, I had never encountered anything like this. If anyone was interested in me, there were, naturally, calls every day, dates at a minimum of two to three times a week. And here... Only later, when Natasha was born, I saw with what difficulty Alik forged out time for her, and understood then that, in reality, he had courted me like crazy. But at the time I had absolutely no idea what to think. But there was a feeling that I was lifted up by a roaring stream that could not be resisted. There was no question that I would even refuse or miss a date.

Such was the situation for some half a year. Then, suddenly, like an avalanche, our relationship leaped to a different level. Some of my doubts started fading away. But in no way was it possible to say that everything became lighter and easier. In any case, just when it appeared to me that our relations somehow stabilized, Alik suddenly stated:

“We have to break up...”

“What? Why?!”

“You are only wasting your time with me. I can never marry you...”

“Excuse me, what’s this about marriage?”

“...because I cannot leave my mother and no one can live with her but me.”

“And did you ask me if I want to marry you? If I consider the time that we spend together a waste? And what I expect and don’t expect from our relationship? In fact, as it happens, the expectation of marriage is in no way attractive to me. I want everything to remain as it is.”

“Well, decide for yourself. I warned you...”

* * *

His mother was Esfīr’ (Esther) Abramovna Rabinovich. Even in
the depth of her old age she remained beautiful, that expressively Semitic beauty which is encountered in the paintings of El Greco and Goya. She was never married – she threw out Alik’s father when she was in her fourth month of pregnancy. To my question posed to Alik, “Why?” the answer was, “It is painful for me to talk about it.” During the course of her entire life, E. A. refused to accept any sort of assistance from Alexander Berezin, who gave the child his name and never gave up rights to him.

Once I asked Alik, did he and his father ever know each other? He answered:

“When I was three and a half years old, he brought me a wooden truck as a present. I played with this truck for a long time. That was the last time he saw me.”

Out of this, I came to the conclusion that Alik briefly saw his father later. Perhaps it was when he was already working at the university and was supposed to go on assignment to Mongolia. According to the former rules, to leave the country even for a short while, one had to present written permission from the parents or a certificate of their death. Age notwithstanding. It did not make any difference whether or not the parents, during the course of their lives, took care of the child. Once E. A., laughing, related to me:

“When I called Alexander a quarter century after I threw him out and asked him to come and sign a permission slip for Alik’s departure abroad, he could not believe his ears that I would invite him to step over the threshold of my home.”

When I met Alik, his father was no longer amongst the living.

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E.A. was born into a family of Kishinev intelligentsia: her father had some sort of an important position in the high school; and her mother was a “midwife and smallpox vaccinator” (the door plaque with such a statement is still kept in my desk). As many were in those days, both were involved in the revolutionary movement. Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Pavel Yushkevich² (Pavlik, as he was called in the

²Prominent Bolshevik revolutionaries. – Editor’s note
family) were friends of the household.

After the revolution, the family moved to Moscow. The parents, by that time, were no longer young – the banner of fighters for the bright future had been taken up by a younger generation. In her youth, E.A. dreamt of becoming a pianist and studied at the Vienna conservatory. (When I met her, she was embarrassed to play amongst outsiders; she still enjoyed performing when she was alone at the apartment. A brilliant piano, a Steinway, was the only luxury that she permitted herself to have in her life. This piano, even now, stands in our Moscow apartment.) In the 1920s the passionate builder of communism E.A. decided that the great cause should be assisted with something more real than classical music. Then she finished the medical institute and became a doctor. Along with practicing medicine, she became involved with scientific work in the area of histology, for which she received a prize and in which defended her dissertation.

But, then a tragedy befell her: the brother of E.A. was arrested (he was the minister of either industry or transport). When the news of his arrest broke, she grabbed her infant son and disappeared into the Russian hinterland. When they came for her mother, she answered to the question of the NKVD\(^3\) agent:

“Where is your daughter?”

Grandmother, an old revolutionary, answered:

“You can cut me to pieces, but I will not answer.”

“Leave the old woman, we will take somebody else,” said the second chekist. And then they left.

Later on, it became known that this indeed happened. During the Khrushchev “thaw,” E.A.’s third-removed cousin suddenly appeared, someone whom she had not seen since childhood, and E.A. did not recognize her. She said to E.A.:

“Had you not have run off, I would not have spent all of those

\(^3\)The Soviet acronym for the name of the secret police at that time. The Soviet secret police has changed acronyms like a chameleon. It started out as the Cheka, and then became the GPU, the OGPU, the NKVD, the NKGB, the MGB, and finally the KGB. Even today, however, people often simply refer to the secret police as “the Cheka” and the secret agents as “the Chekists.” – Editor’s note
years in the camp.”

E.A. found a job in a god-forsaken place in Russia’s heartland, at a tuberculosis hospital. There, she withdrew from clinical work and began to work as a pathologist-anatomist...

I think that these childhood years greatly impacted Alik. His reserved nature of detaching himself from society, his silence, secretive nature, and deep pessimism were, in my opinion, the result of a “happy Stalinist childhood,” when he and his mother were in semi-legal status, and it was necessary to live undetectable lives whenever possible. Alik relaxed only in nature, when hiking with friends. There is one sole photograph, the only snapshot of Alik’s unrestrained laughter, made when he and Valerii Nikolsky were in the northern Urals, wearing some sort of monstrous windbreakers, endlessly happy...

1940 brought a bit of light to their exile. Mother and son had just come back to Moscow when the war began. They, with her elderly parents, were evacuated to Alma-Ata. There, out of the family of four people, only E.A. worked. Only based on several slips of the tongue could I imagine what they had to withstand – it was not in Alik’s character to complain. I’ll bring up two examples. Once, when we were living together, I was in an elevator with our neighbor. In my hands, I held a huge pumpkin.

“You eat pumpkin,” thoughtfully stated the neighbor.

“Yes,” I answered. “Alik and his mother very much like pumpkin with millet porridge.”

I did not even know about the existence of such a dish previously; they had introduced it to me.

“It is immediately clear that they do not know what hunger is. With such pumpkins we fed ourselves during the entire war. Now I cannot even look at it,” said the neighbor.

I related our dialogue to Alik, and he smiled. “The next time you ride in the elevator with him, tell him he’s the one who does not know what hunger is. For us, such a pumpkin was considered a huge

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4The author means WWII, which in the Soviet Union started with the German invasion on June 22, 1941. –Editor’s note
feast..."

They were among the first to return from the evacuation. Once I asked, “Was it very difficult in Moscow near the end of the war?”

“It was more difficult afterwards.”

“Why?”

“They stopped letting people into the subway barefoot, so you had to sneak past the militsioners.5"

During the winter he walked around at home wearing socks, but during the summer simply went barefoot. He ignored slippers as a misconception. And looking at those bare feet, I always thought, “Greetings from the hungry childhood...”

After the war, things got a bit better. Alik grew and studied well – all of his diplomas were diplomas with honors; he was always a straight-A student. While in school, he began to participate in the mathematics club at the university, which was led and advised by Dynkin. E.A. defended her doctoral dissertation. Materially, things got better. They bought a piano and began to actively assemble a family library.

There is no question that E.A. was a brilliant pathologist-anatomist but she had a difficult character. She was accustomed to her word being “the law,” and was absolutely intolerant of the opinions of people around her. Once I asked Alik why E.A. refused to have clinical practice. “Because she finds it impossible to talk to the patients,” he answered.

When I came to their home, E.A. was already retired. Alik remained her only light in life. There was no one else around. Sometimes in her childhood there had been girlfriends, but with those who did not die, she had ended relations. The only person with whom she could share any problems was her son. Unfortunately, the birth of her granddaughter also did not beautify her life. She told me on a number of occasions: “Natasha is happiness for you, Lena; only my son exists for me.”

Once I asked Alik, “Look, E.A. was a beautiful and interesting woman. In her youth she probably attracted the attention of many

5Policemen – Translator’s note
men, didn’t she?”

“Well, she did, but mother did not want anybody. One person was trying to get to her for five years, but later even he gave up.”

“But if she had not been alone, you would have left the house?”

I will never forget how he looked at me. Well ... mother and son have their own secret bond. I do not want to and do not have any moral right to touch upon it. When Natasha was born and we began to live together, I did my best to build a new architecture within the family and create a pleasant communal life. Unfortunately, to no avail. E.A. could, right on the spot, while we sat peacefully in the kitchen while awaiting Alik to come to lunch, say to me, “Now, Elena, while Natasha is little, you are necessary for us so as to take care of her. But when Natasha gets older, and we have no need for you, it would be very nice for the three of us without you.”

The end was inevitable: I wrangled a cooperative apartment out of my institute, grabbed Natasha, and left to live separately. From then on it only got worse for Alik – now he had to rip himself into three parts: between mathematics, his mother, and us...

* * *

Once I said to Alik, “I stand in the fifth place for you.”

“How did you derive that?”

“In first place is mathematics, in second place is your daughter, third and fourth is divided between your motherland and your biological mother, and I receive the “honorary” fifth.”

“Well, if you like to be so.”

“No, I do not like this at all, but fact is a fact.”

“Fact? It depends how you look at it.”

“And how should one look at it?”

“Lay this out not in planar geometry, but in three-dimensional space.”

Well, on such mathematics, I did not have enough brains. I happily responded, “So this means that in some space there is no one

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6Something like a condominium. In the Soviet Union it was very difficult to get them.  
—Translator’s note
between us? This suits me.”

“Me, as well,” smiled Alik.

When Natasha was born, he returned to the issue of marriage.

“Perhaps, for the benefit of the child, it would be better if we formally marry?”

I have to note that in his voice rang an obvious note of unwillingness.

“Why?” I answered. “My parents were never registered. More precisely, they got married when I turned sixteen years old, and I needed to receive a passport. And even this was not necessary. For my own self-esteem, I do not need to be registered – I have already been married once. As for you, in addition to our common “prison of peoples,” in which we all live behind the Iron Curtain, you sit in a personal cell, created by your mother’s love. You yourself are afraid of hanging on yourself extra marital chains. No, let E.A. live for as long as it is inscribed in the Book of Life, and then you will live by yourself, breathing at least a bit of relative freedom. And, if later you come to me and Natasha and say that you want to register, it is then that we will evaluate the situation and see if I will agree to put a new stamp into my passport.”

Alik hugged me silently. To my mind, he was grateful to me. But I know that he always had a predilection that his mother would outlive him...

As for the documents concerning Natasha, from the moment of her birth, Alik determinately put into his head that her papers had to be in an ideal state. He himself went to ZAGS\(^7\) in order to officialize his parental rights. From there, he was sent on numerous occasions to obtain additional paperwork, and they later demanded a written statement from me that Félix Alexandrovich Berezin was recognized as the father of my daughter. But, later even this turned out to be not enough. I was required to come in person. So Alik led me with an iron hand to ZAGS. When we came the supervisor greeted him like an old acquaintance.

“Instead of having you come in so many times with various papers,

\(^7\)Office of Civil Status Registry and Documentation. –Translator’s note
it would have been easier to simply get married. Nothing prevents you from doing so – neither of you are at the moment married.”

Apparently she was concerned for my interests!

“No, we had better go our own way,” I replied.

“You are sure about this?” the supervisor said with skepticism.

“Yes, I am sure...”

I was never Alik’s official wife, and I became his unofficial widow...

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In my memoirs, the pronoun “I” occurs often – I admit this. But I do not write a scientific treatise about a renowned scientist, mathematician-theorist who had died on the forty-ninth year of his life. I attempt to convey my subjective recollection about a person, reconstructing the atmosphere in which he lived and attempting to relate what occurred in his “first circle.”\(^8\)

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Alik had his own very stern demands in everyday life. Nothing in any possible way could disturb his work. For example, when Natasha was born, he said to me, “Arrange things in such a way that it will be quiet at night, otherwise I do not think clearly.”

In general, there were complications with sounds. He had an acute sense of hearing. Without straining himself, Alik could hear the conversation amongst passersby who walked at a distance of 1.5 to 2 meters from him.

“The KGB is dying to have you,” I used to joke. “If they knew, they would find applications for your talent.”

In response, Alik would become irritated – Soviet security forces were among the rare themes for which he had no sense of humor. Before meeting him, I used to think that an acute sense of hearing is a wonderful thing. But, as it turned out, possessing such a distinction

\(^8\)A reference to the Solzhenitsin novel *The First Circle*, the title of which is based on a quotation from Dante. The novel describes three or so days in the life of the occupants of a *gulag* camp in the Moscow suburbs, the Marfino sharashka. Many are technicians or academics. The manuscript of *The First Circle* was seized by the KGB in 1965. –Editor’s note
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has its own significant inconveniences. In the apartment on Vinnitskaya Street, Alik could not sleep in the room where the window was on the side of the boiler since the humming disturbed him, despite the fact that they lived on the ninth floor. Once the neighbors, who lived one floor down, hung up a chime clock on the wall against which was pressed the couch on which we slept. This ended in a tragedy – Alik lost sleep. I had to go to explain. The neighbors, pleasant people, could not understand anything, but accepted my plea and re-hung the clock on a different wall...

As for food, clothing, and comfort, his demands (if you could actually call them demands) were minimal – being nourishing, fits well, not cold – no more than that. The sole complication presented itself as head-wear. In addition to the fact that, for a male, Alik did not have pronounced facial features, the brain part of his head was significantly larger than average.

"Why was it necessary for humans to evolve so far from monkeys?" I used to lament, when it continuously appeared that his winter hat, which was procured with such difficulty, turned out to be too tight. For skiing, he kept specially knit woolen hats for decades.

The question of fashion did not exist for Alik. In the 1970s, when various types of nylons and similar jerseys had just come in, he refused to wear clothing made out of them. Now, we all know that synthetic fabrics do not breathe and often cause allergies. But at the time this was perceived as one of his idiosyncrasies. He wore cotton shirts in the summer and woolen sweaters in the winter. It made no difference whether these were old, worn-through, and discolored items from being washed with other things. For his winter hiking trips, he had a pair of woolen underwear from those which had been sent by the Allies in the Lend-Lease Act, along with canned meat, for the Red Army.9 I have no idea how this underwear came into the family, but Alik greatly valued it, maintaining that such items one could "no longer get." I was forbidden to wash it because, due to its old age, it could fall apart or lose its warm qualities. I was

9Lend-Lease was the major United States program in 1941-1945 which enabled the United States to supply the Soviet Union and other Allied nations with vast amounts of war material. –Editor’s note
allowed only to air it out on the balcony and then later stuff it into 
a sack and toss it into the loft until the next winter outing. When I 
tried to rebel saying that this was “just dirt” Alik answered, to my 
dismay, “On the second day of an outing, I become no cleaner than 
this underwear.”

He had his own understanding of what is seemly and what is not. 
I do not recall having ever seen him wear a necktie. The collar of his 
shirt was always unbuttoned. “Otherwise I cannot breathe.”

But, at the same time, he never allowed himself to go around 
wearing an unbuttoned blazer or coat. Once one winter we rode 
in the subway. The train stopped amidst two stations. Due to the 
absence of ventilation in the car, it became unbearably hot. I advised, 
“Unbutton the coat.”

“No, it is unseemly. So what if it’s hot? It is necessary to perse-
vere.”

And this was all of Alik – a free spirit and a buttoned-up soul...

Having moved to Vinnitskaya Street, I became acquainted with 
their household. In the kitchen, in the drawer for tableware, amidst 
the rather unpretentious steel spoons and forks, one tin spoon stood 
out in its unattractiveness. I asked whether it was possible to throw 
it away.

“Oh, yes, you would eat with silver or, in an extreme case, with 
cupronickel; who cares that this spoon is light and of awfully conve-
nient size and form ... ”

Indeed, the spoon, as it turned out, was surprisingly convenient. 
Natasha used it all of her childhood, and I carry it with me from 
apartment to apartment, from country to country, and now I intend 
to bring it to my granddaughter...

Alik did not smoke or drink. Now this was not a determined 
resolution; he simply did not feel a special need to do so. He did not 
like coffee, but while working all day long, would drink strong, freshly 
brewed tea with lumps of sugar, which he nibbled on, something that 
to me was an apparent reminder of the war years.

When I moved in with them in Vinnitskaya Street, he gathered his 
friends to celebrate the occasion. I ran about the shops, “procured” 
various delicacies, and prepared all sorts of food. The guests, as
usual, all arrived late. Finally, we sat at the table, and, suddenly, it came to be known that there was not a drop of anything alcoholic in the house, and the stores were all closed. All, to varying degrees, were perplexed. I recall how angry Nikita was. She had spent the entire day skiing outside the city, anticipating how at Alik’s, she would relax with pleasure with a glass of vodka. But such a thought never entered Alik’s head, and I, in light of my inexperience, had not anticipated that I would also have to take care of this.

“And you did not kill him after the guests departed?!” asked Sveta, when I told her about the disaster of my first party.

“For what? He’s a whole and sincere person and, therefore, cannot expect to offer his friends something in which he finds no pleasure.”

Our daughter does not smoke. Nor does she drink wine, cognac, or coffee. Living in France, this is a challenge. But apparently the father’s genes turn out to be stronger than the tradition of the country.

To imagine Alik in an atmosphere of luxury would have been absolutely impossible. Once one winter he agreed with his friend to work for two weeks at his empty dacha. I once got a free day, and so I decided to go and visit him. The dacha was in the village of Old Bolsheviks, situated along one endless street, down both sides of which stood absolutely identical two-story wooden houses. In those times, these dachas seemed the peak of luxury. I walked along the middle of the street. “It cannot be that Alik found himself in such chateaux.”

I walked for a long time. And then I saw a dacha with a slanted wall and caving-in roof. I did not need to look at the number of the house. I knew that I had come to the correct address.

Alik had unprejudiced opinions about everything. During the same visit, after lunch (I brought homemade food, because I knew that on his winter trips, he lives on kasha, pasta, and canned food), we lay upon something like a couch, laughed, and I related the latest Moscow news, and later noted, “In general, it appears risky to come here without warning you. And what if you were not alone?”

“But I, in reality, am not here all by myself. I just don’t know whether it is a she or a he.”
“How do you expect me to understand that?”

“How do you expect me to understand that?”

“Here, there are cracks the size of a finger in the walls. Whether I heat the house or not, by morning it is terribly cold. So at night a mouse comes to visit me, sits on my chest right at that place where your head now rests, and we heat each other.”

I screamed and jumped from the couch.

“You prefer that it be a woman?” laughed Alik. Well, what can you say to this? I returned to my previous spot.

* * *

As much as everyday life did not concern him, the opposite was the case when it related to intellect. His choices for his circle of friends were determined by the breadth of knowledge and the ability to think in a nonstandard way of a friend-to-be. Here there were no compromises. Once the decision was made – with whom he wanted to associate and with whom he couldn’t – it was impossible to move Alik from these positions.

But at the same time he was also always interested in an interesting person, any person. While on vacations he used to like meeting new people from different social backgrounds. He didn’t have a drop of snobbism. It happened, at times during the summer when we vacationed in the village, I would go along the street and see two men talking in the distance. I would come closer – one of them would be Alik. If he wanted to talk to somebody there was little that could hinder his way.

Once, my former father-in-law, with whom I maintained warm relations, was passing through Moscow. Alik declared that he wanted to meet him. I was highly surprised and asked why he needed this.

“Based on your stories, this is an outstanding scientist and person (which was absolute truth), and life does not offer many chances to converse with such an exclusive character. Hence, I don’t want to lose such an opportunity.”

And despite the fact that this was in the middle of summer, while we were living at a dacha near Sotrino, and we did not want to drag the one-year-old Natasha to scalding hot Moscow, because there was no one to leave her with, we went to the city. Alik was pleased, and
when Grigorii Leonidovich Lempert did arrive there soon after, he was sorry that he only had one chance to meet with him.

There was no such thing as putting too much energy into trying to have an intense discussion. In general, such a form of communication for him was extremely important. But in contrast, everything that reminded him of everyday chatter, Alik could not stand.

For example, there was a house in Moscow which I liked to visit. The lady of the house was intelligent and good-spirited, but she had one weakness – she desired to create at her home something like a salon. I just don’t know how Alik picked up this nuance from my brief discussions, but there were no forces that I had that could drag him there with me. The lady of the house so very much wanted to get the prize of “ingenious Berezin!” But Alik said, “She will not get me” – and all of my requests were in vain.

* * *

Maintaining his physical form was a primary part of his personal hygiene. He did not exercise when he woke up, but tried to go for a jog at least twenty minutes before going to sleep. It is only now that just about one of every two people jogs, but then he was the first amongst my acquaintances who began to run. To spend one day a week outside the city was just as important for him as it was to all of us to go to a bath house when the hot water was turned off in our homes. Under the slightest of pretenses, he would leave to wander around, go skiing, and ride a bike whenever he could – around the city and during distant excursions. He was capable of long-distance walks and lengthy skiing journeys. As young people, they went out in large groups, but in later years many slowly began to drop out. After the death of Valera Nikolsky, the more common companions of Alik were Nikita Vvedenskaya and Victor Palamodov.

To his sporting inventory, he paid far more attention than to his clothing. The front entrance was overloaded with skis of different types – downhill, short-distance, cross country, long distance, and winter outings. He greatly valued his bicycle and, thus, did not keep it in the hallway of our building, but there was no free space in the apartment; therefore, Alik tossed out the back of our sofa, on
which we slept, and in the free space, he constructed a stand for the bicycle and camouflaged it with Vietnamese straw. It all turned out merry and amusing. Our guests were enticed to find the bicycle in the apartment. This was an almost unfailing trick for Alik – no one could find it. (When Alik wanted to and found time, he could be quite useful around the house – we never had to call in an electrician or repairman.) I used to “complain” that I slept hugging not Alik but the bicycle. But I used to encourage him in his maintenance of physical form, “Well, of course, inside a healthy body there, is a healthy spirit.”

“And in a healthy body, there is a work-capable brain,” – he replied in absolute seriousness.

Later, when the court-appointed doctors in Magadan were performing the autopsy, I was told, “Well, they say that Siberians are healthy, but I do not recall the last time I saw a man over forty years old with a heart and veins so untouched by age, as in this Muscovite.”

Alik used to say to me with surprise, “You consider yourself to be a cultivated individual, but physical culture is such a vital part of a cultured society – so how can you not take good care of yourself?”

“Well, what do you expect – I grew up a sickly child in a Jewish family in which, not for medical reasons but by mother’s request, I was excused from physical education in school during the course of all ten school years.”

My physical ineptitude led to our inability to go out camping together. And in the realm of our everyday life, we had disagreements due to our different backgrounds. In accordance with Alik’s mannerisms, there were traits that very much disturbed me. For example, he did not leave tips. Once I said that our hungry childhood was long behind us, and it was time to behave like a respectable person who can support his material position in life. He answered, “No one gives me tips for my work, so why do I have to do it for others?”

But Alik was by no means stingy. He easily lent money, if money was around, and was not angry when it was not returned.

“It is clear that he has no money,” he said in one of such circumstances.

As for myself, I was raised in a well-to-do family. My childhood
and teenage years were spent in Riga where, at that time, gallant behavior had not yet been erased. When we moved to Moscow, for a long time I could not get used to the rudeness, which it seemed had soaked into the air of the capital. Alik would periodically get some of this “air.” Once, an entire storm came about because he did not give me his hand when we were exiting a trolleybus. At a loss, Alik tried to justify himself, saying, “If we had been on a hike or it was necessary to overcome some sort of an obstacle or you were in the city walking on crutches, then, of course, I would have helped. But in the present case, why?”

“Simply put, you’re a certified representative of Muscovite rudeness and sassiness. If you went to work overseas, then before they found out that you’re a genius scientist, they would think you were an unrefined commoner,” I would plead with him.

What is most amusing is that in his behavior, Alik turned out to be much more contemporary than myself. When Natasha was in France, attending boarding school in a neighboring town, and I came to bring her home for the summer holidays, a young lad, who was obviously in love with her, came to see her off. The three of us walked toward the car, and Natasha and I dragged her heavy bags behind us while the embarrassed young man walked alongside us with empty hands, being indecisive in offering his assistance. Out of fear of underscoring my age, and for Natasha to not have to touch upon the issue of equal rights of women, we chose not to solicit his assistance. We crossed the students’ sports court, there was not a single cloud in the sky, and I walked and thought, “Alik, if you can see us from above, how you now must be laughing at my misunderstanding of foreign rules of good behavior!”

* * *

Yes, many things separated us. Quite likely, there were more factors that divided us than united us. We both loved our work – were absorbed by it – and this was, already at a minimum, half our lives. But if I could describe what I did in a very general way, for me it was absolutely impossible to understand what occupied his mind. I loved noisy company, merriment, and dancing. Alik
believed that real socializing could only be tête-à-tête, and that he just had no time for any sort of sitting around making small talk. On the outside, he appeared easy going, the movement of his body was somewhat restrained, but internally he always ran as if he felt that he had little time left, that he was late... He loved concerts, theater, and the cinema but almost always said, “Go yourself and then you tell me about it.” When I came home, he and Natasha were usually already fast asleep. The next day during supper, I would describe what I saw.

During the October months there were five to six birthdays to attend of the people who were closest to him – his mother, Nikita Vvedenskaya, Valera Nikolsky, mine, and several other friends. Alik adored these celebrations and took part in them with pleasure, but every time he grumbled, “October – an awful month, there is absolutely no time left to work.”

And so, what united us? I think that if we had met early in youth, our union would not have lasted. But we met when we already had several life experiences behind us and a lot of sadness. We had already learned how to be patient, and not to overemphasize those things that divided us. We valued what united us. We were like two molecules which tend to bond and hold on. We wished to lean on each other, to warm each other up. Out of all human qualities, he valued kindness most of all, considering this to be a gift which one encounters more rarely than genius. Once he said, “In my life, I have only encountered ten geniuses, but kind people, only two, the second being you.”

In reality, this was not true. If one is to give full disclosure, our friend Sveta had said to me once, “No one has the ability to support and comfort someone as you do when you want to, but no one tosses someone aside as coldly and heartlessly as you, either.”

My relationship with him was something special, even there in the lobby of the Kalinin Hotel where we first met. In the depths of Alik’s dilated pupils, there appeared to me a call for help, and I desired to offer my hand as if to someone drowning. And then during our ten years together, the feeling never left me that, in the entire wide world, only I could help him get through life... Oh, well...
When we decided to unite our fates, it was necessary to also unite our libraries. In their three-room apartment, along almost every wall, stood shelves packed with books. The books were not only read but worked-through and analyzed. I could not cease to be amazed not only at the breadth of Alik’s knowledge in various branches of science, literature, and art, but also at his persistent interest in any given trivial information. Such an impression he left not only on me. For example, recently Viacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov was recalling the engaging conversations he had with Alik during their walks, and how once, when they accidentally met in Dubna, they discussed with mutual pleasure the meaning of the number “two” in various descriptions of the world, from mythology to contemporary science. To contemplate and analyze was just an everyday part of life for Alik, like breathing. As a result he had his own specific view about every issue, and it did not just fall out of the air but was based upon careful thought.

But I will return to the story of the library. It consisted of several parts, the largest being mathematics and physics – these books were later partially taken by Alik’s students, and the rest I donated to the University. There was a section on medicine and biology; here E.A. and I had many identical copies. Alik loved and collected fairy-tales, and there was one shelf packed with fairy-tales of the world. In addition, there were four “hidden” shelves which were locked with a key. Pre-war and pre-revolution literature was kept there. Most of the books lacked covers and title pages – traces of Stalin’s era when, being cautious of searches, people concealed the names of authors who had been declared “Enemies of the People.”

In the section of literary fiction, we also had many duplicates. Some of them we traded and the rest we sold, but we balked at Pushkin.\textsuperscript{10} We each had identical ten-tome sets, only differing in the color of the spines – he had brown, and I had blue. Each wanted to keep our own. As a result, we retained both. The books stood on the shelves, one under the other, and each read their own. Natasha knew the history of both editions. She asked me once when she grew

\textsuperscript{10}Alexander Pushkin (1799 – 1837), the greatest Russian poet. –Editor’s note
up, “Mamma, which Pushkin should I read – blue or brown?”

“Perhaps, read the brown,” I answered. “Maybe you will find some of Poppa’s notes, or the book will open upon the pages he most often read, and if you are lucky, you will capture what he thought about at the moment and what he felt. Any of my perceptions about Pushkin I can tell you myself.”

And I myself, when there is a moment, glance into the brown ones. My blue Pushkins remain on the shelf, poor orphans ...

We had many art books too. We bought them, and we also often received them as gifts. This was long ago – during that period no one worried about prices. And there were people – students of Alik, my patients – who wanted to thank us somehow. And giving art books was the best expression of gratitude. We had no better pleasure than to curl up on the couch and gaze upon the reproductions together. But there was one special book.

“We will meet each other once in adagio-Vivaldi,” wrote Akhmatova, and Alik and I met under the paintings of Bosch. Looking at them, Alik fell into the depths of analyzing historical developments, spoke of creativity, human genius, and contemplated the mechanisms of discovery, attempting to reach

“...for the very essence.
    In work, in searching for the path,
    In the heart’s turmoil.
    For the essence of days gone by,
    For their causes,
    For foundations, for roots,
    For the core.”

In these moments, I had my eyes wide open and could magically see how he was capable of

“...always grasping the thread
    Of fates and events,
    To live, to think, to feel, to love,

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11Anna Akhmatova (1889 – 1966) was the heart and soul of St. Petersburg tradition of Russian poetry over the course of half a century. Akhmatova’s work ranges from short lyric poems to epic cycles, such as Requiem, her tragic masterpiece on the Stalinist terror. The above line is from Midnight Verses. –Editor’s note
To attain discoveries. "12
Together we penetrated the darkness of centuries, departed into the universe, and climbed into the heights of human understanding. And if father Aleksander (Men’) was correct in preaching against physical love giving priority to platonic love, then these were the moments of our highest union...

* * *

Alik maintained warm contacts with his ex, Ira Karpova, his “one and only wife,” as Natasha likes to emphasize.

After many years, already after Alik’s death, Ira and I became friends; she and Natasha have a very tender relationship. When Natasha was twelve years old, Ira painted a portrait of her which now hangs in Natasha’s home in France. Ira was one of the first people Natasha called to inform that she had given birth to a daughter...

While Alik was still alive, several times a year on certain pre-arranged dates, Ira would call him, and they would meet. At first, Alik would be careful in telling me about these rendezvous, but later, seeing that I considered them to be nothing more than completely natural, asked me, “And you react to this perfectly calmly?”

“And how should I react?,” I asked bewildered. “After all you weren’t born yesterday. You, like I, have a past which neither of us are intending to desert. You and Ira met and parted long before you and I met, so this is your story, and I have no connections to it. I have no pretensions on Ira’s, nor anybody else’s, place in your soul, just as my spot, no one else can occupy.”

“It is great for you,” sighed Alik, “you are not jealous.”

But he was extremely jealous. He had no basis to be jealous, but jealousy is a character trait, not an inadequate reaction to external circumstances. Once, after consecutive and unannounced price hikes, I said with indignance, “What woman can permit herself to buy new stockings rather than fix her old pantyhose?! Only if she is going off on a date with a lover!”

12Excerpts from one of the late poems of Boris Pasternak, arguably the greatest Russian poet of the Soviet time. –Editor’s note
“And so,” Alik reacted with unexpected interest, “this is important information.”

From that time onwards, handing over to me his salary, he invariably added, “But keep in mind that we do not have money for new stockings.”

I have a long-time, “under the skin” friend – he and I have our own special relationship, our own topics for discussion, and during our rare meetings a third person is always too much. Both of us are night owls and can talk until morning. Alik, it appeared, understood everything, but every time he awaited my return from Lyonya and did not sleep. He never verbally objected, in any way, but simply waited for me and did not sleep, and I knew that after a sleepless night he could not work. Oh, well, the whole thing ended in that I began to return home from Lyonya’s earlier.

Once Alik suggested that I invite to our home the poet N, an acquaintance of mine, about whose poetry I often talked. He received him with unusual friendliness. I did not at first understand what was behind his superpolite “beau monde” behavior. At one point in the conversation, the poet said that he wrote his diploma thesis on Pushkin.

“This is absolutely wonderful!” Alik pronounced with enthusiasm. “I have thought about Pushkin a lot and wished to talk about him with a professional. Here, for example, how should one understand his lines...”

In answer, the poet pronounced something rather shallow. “Yes, yes, of course, but if one were to imagine...” continued Alik even more politely.

Again, something insignificant in response. And Alik continued further, “And what do you think, what did Pushkin think about..., how did he feel about...”

And in this way he continued until the end, speaking in a soft, piercing, well-intended tone. The poet was not even close to being a fool, but could not bear the depth of the analysis on which the proposed discussion was led and continued to answer in a rather helpless way. This was followed by an absolutely harmless question or comment made by Alik, then following up on the points made by the
“professional.” Before my eyes, a person was being destroyed. He was being destroyed politely, intelligently, and I would even say, sweetly. To my great regret, I cannot reconstruct verbatim this dialogue, and I do not wish to invent it. I can only convey my impression that this was not a machine-gun or tank attack, but a soft, almost delicate, crushing by a steamroller – I simply saw how a happy-go-lucky poet was turned into a grey, flat, and lifeless line.

It was extremely interesting to listen to Alik; his mind games brought me into a state of amazement. If he wanted to be a charmer, he could certainly do so, at least for me.

When the poet left, having happily rubbed his hands as if nothing had happened, Alik noted, “Pleasant evening we spent. It’s only too bad that he sat around for so long.”

“How can you behave yourself this way?!” I launched at him. “You totally destroyed a person!”

“You think so?” Alik asked me with a knowingly naive tone.

“Yes, I think so! And you know this yourself perfectly well. What did he do to you that you should persecute him in such a cruel, Jesuit way?! You are simply jealous. You should be ashamed of yourself! You are a scientist of world renown, but are jealous as the worst janitor would be!”

“And why does a scientist have fewer rights on his woman than a janitor!” continued Alik in the same naive manner.

“So now you are starting in on me! One victim is not enough for the evening?”

“So you do, indeed, think that I beat him? Well, this means that everything is in order, and now I can go to Vinnitskaya Street where mother has been waiting for me.”

Need I add that the poet and I never saw or heard from each other again?

* * *

It would be correct to say that Alik could not stand vulgarity or low class culture. Such culture simply did not stick with him.

Once in his younger years, after an intense day of work, he went out for a walk and saw a theater poster which said “Sad Gvozdiki.”
Having read $gvózdíkí$\textsuperscript{13} he thought that this had to be a charming comedy and decided to go and entertain himself. How disappointed he became when the play turned out to be a melodrama “Sad Gvozdíki.” With great difficulty, he waited until the intermission and then left.

Once, after Natasha’s birth Alik, returned from his evening stroll earlier than usual and was almost green in color despite the walk. I became frightened that he was ill. It turned out that behind him two schoolgirls had been taking a stroll, and with his keen sense of hearing Alik unintentionally heard their conversation, which he related to me:

“I am an adult and you and I are close, but I cannot repeat even to you what these thirteen, fourteen-year-old teens spoke about – using which parameters and sexual criteria, they judged their young acquaintances...”

And this is despite the fact that Alik was far from prude, as he liked a sharp word, and believed that one can say anything, but the key is to say it properly. When I am in good mood, I like to entertain friends, relating to them “an episode out of life.” Among my stories, there are piquant ones. Friends like them and sometimes ask for an encore. Listening, Alik always laughed, as if he heard it for the first time (or once in a while would forget?) and was clearly pleased...

In the 1970s, the Iron Curtain opened up a bit, and we began to find out about certain elements of life “outside.” Once, having returned from work, I told of the following marvel: “One of our coworkers was vacationing in Bulgaria. Can you imagine, there are beaches where people go totally nude – men, women, children, all together.”

“So, what? Sometimes during our camping trips, we also stripped bare.”

“Camping is another story. You did that in extreme situations, as you had to, not just like that, while vacationing just for fun.”

“I never took you for a sanctimonious person.”

\textsuperscript{13}Play on words: $gvózdíkí$ in Russian means “little nails,” while $gvozdíkí$ “carnations.”

–Translator’s note
“It has nothing to do with being a hypocrite. At my institute, I constantly see relatives who, due to a lack of service personnel, take care of their loved ones, as they wash, they clean, and they carry around chamber pots. Want it or not, they see the naked bodies of their relatives in all their intimate detail. This is an unfortunate necessity – illness, death. But under normal circumstances, nakedness should not be turned into normalcy, as it has its own function: in art – to evoke euphoria, in real life – desire.”

“Yes?” In Alik’s eyes there lit up devilish sparks and, after an expressive pause, “Perhaps you are right in some of this.”

* * *

With his secretive nature and outward reserve, it was difficult to imagine what insane passions were boiling inside him.

“Ice and flame” – this was the only whole. He did not explain his actions, but the reason could be absolutely unexpected.

His hair became grey very early on, during the darkest period of his life – when he parted with Gelfand. Alik’s papers were not published, and the significance of his work was not understood. He was embarrassed of his greyness, thinking it betrayed all of the suffering he had to live through. As much as I tried, I just could not convince him that grey hair on a man is beautiful and that women love it. But a complex is a complex...

At the end of the 1970s, there came from somewhere a fashion for the starvation diet. People fasted in different ways – they would go without food for one day a week, several days in a row, once a month, and in various other ways. Alik and I both laughed at this fad. But suddenly, Alik came home and declared that he had begun to fast. I should note, although I worked all of my life at the Institute of Surgery, I am convinced that without special medical reasons, a person’s organism should not undergo such stresses.

“First off, before beginning to torture yourself, you could have discussed it with me. After all, your wife is a certified doctor.”

“What is there to discuss – I knew it anyway. I knew you would be against it, so I locked myself in for two days at mom’s apartment, and today is the third day that I have been fasting. So, come to
grips with it."

“This is just ridiculous! Your health doesn’t belong just to you! You should have a sense of responsibility for your family. You don’t have the right to act so simplistically!”

“Don’t worry. I am doing this under the supervision of a doctor-dietician. Later I’ll have to come out the fast on a special diet, beginning with fresh squeezed juices. Here, I even bought a juice maker for this.”

He fasted for ten days. Despite this, he kept working and, on the outside, behaved as if nothing was going on.

Coming out of hunger is an especially important moment and has to be done with products that are not polluted by chemicals. I could be against this as much as I wanted, but I ran to the market to buy organic vegetables and fruits and attempted to squeeze juices to serve them to Alik immediately after squeezing. Once in the kitchen, when I was silently preparing a portion of juice, my body language showing my indignation very explicitly, he said, “Don’t be angry. I could not do it any other way. Over the course of one month Valera Nikolsky died and also my close friend in Kiev whom you did not know. Without an external distraction, I could not have overcome these losses.”

I froze with a partially peeled carrot in my hand. Of course I knew that Alik was closely tied to Valera and understood that his death was extremely difficult – and, in addition to this, not a word from him! – but to such a level! Next to me was a person who was suffering so much that he almost died himself, but I absolutely did not imagine that this was actually happening!...

Alik’s unusual reserve often led to major complications in his relationships with the outside world. Once he told me that in his youth he was interested in some young woman. They had a date set for one evening, but he decided to walk outside the city during the first half of the day. While walking he miscalculated the time, and at the last minute discovered that he was late for the commuter train, which would have brought him to town to the designated spot. So, he ran out to the train rails and then ran along the rails. The train caught up with him and the engineer wildly signaled at him, but Alik
did not move from the railway, understanding that the commuter train would pass him by, he continued to run in front of the train along the rail track. The engineer was able to stop the train, and he jumped out of the train onto the rails and showered Alik with the rudest swearing, but, once he heard the explanation, he calmed down and let Alik ride with him. Arriving in Moscow, the elated and happy Alik started daydreaming on his way to the rendezvous, and as a result lost fifteen minutes and did not quite make it in time. The young woman was angry and said that the only reason she had waited for him was to explain to him that she would not accept such disrespect, and proudly walked away.

“And you did not tell her? You could have been hit by the train because of her!”

“What’s the point, if the person does not understand ...”

I was twice the age of that girl, but I cannot say that that always helped. Misunderstandings could range from amusing to rather weighty ones. Once, during the first months of our acquaintance, Alik rather quickly ran off from our date, leaving me, to put it mildly, in complete confusion. “The events” developed in the following way. During our previous meeting, he asked why I always wore slacks.

“Do you have something against that?”

“No, but skirts and dresses are more feminine.”

This comment was enough for me to immediately dig out from my closet my old boots with heels, since I wore more casual shoes with my pants. I urgently took them to get repaired, and, to our next date, I ran off wearing my spike boots and a skirt to my navel, thinking myself the apex of femininity in such clothing. At that time, we had decided to go to the Pushkin Museum\textsuperscript{14} to view the portrait exhibition. And then, in the festive silence of the museum, I discovered that my newly repaired boots loudly squeaked. I already knew then that Alik physically could not stand some sounds. I felt disinterested with the pleasant portrait art, only thinking how I should move around the least, but, with the slightest of movement, the cursed boots simply shouted across the whole entire museum.

\textsuperscript{14}The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. – Editor’s note
Feeling positively unhappy, I stood before a painting of an unknown artist on which was a full body image of a nine-months pregnant woman, in a black and red striped robe. She had green eyes half the size of her face, full of tears, and so much sorrow and anguish emanated from the entire painting, that I, somehow unwillingly, thought to myself aloud, “Such was the wife of Andrei Volkonskii...”


“She likewise was afraid of her belly, as she felt that it would bring her death.” As soon as we left the museum, Alik quickly said his farewells. “It is them, those damned boots,” I scolded myself, remaining alone.

He called that same evening. “You’re absolutely correct, concerning the painting with the pregnant woman. Yet it was not the little princess but the wife of Prince Yusupov; she died from fever during childbirth. The painting was painted by one of the prince’s court artists. I am calling just to express to you my admiration of your keen understanding of art.”

“If Alik only knew out of what “garbage” my remark came!” I smirked to myself and said aloud:

“And how did you find out about the history of the painting?”

“I knew that today there would be a program about this exhibit, so I hurried home so mother could at least watch it on the television since she cannot go to the museum herself. The program turned out to be interesting, and I continued to watch it. And there I heard a discussion about this specific painting.”

“Well, then, all's well that ends well. But if I had not made my comments about the painting, if they had not discussed it on the program, if they..., if they..., I would never have found out that my poor boots were not, in any way, at fault. Would it not have been much easier if he would have simply explained what was going on?...

Once, when we lived together on Vinnitskaya Street, in an absolutely lighthearted way, I said, “I became a cook because of you.”

The reaction was surprisingly sharp:

“And you believe that it is just a cook I need, and I don’t deserve

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15Characters from Leo Tolstoy’s novel War and Peace. – Editor’s note
anything better?"

Well, here I had much to say: explaining to him, based on popular understanding, that everything depends on the man – if he feels himself to be deserving, then he will consider his wife a queen even if she is in life, in reality, a cook. But a weak king will treat his queen/wife as a cook or, even worse, as a court dog. In general, we played out an old anecdote “mother, he called me a bitch.” Many years later, long after Alik’s death, Louisa Kirillova told me that she had always liked Alik, and feeling sorry for him for his unkemptness, once she decided to marry him to her maid. Alik bridled at this suggestion.

If one could know and understand!.. How many misunderstandings would it have been possible to avoid? And how many of them remained undetected ...

But sometimes at the edge of a disaster he betrayed his own rules. Once when Natasha and I were moving into our own apartment on Kedrov Street, there occurred a chain of misunderstandings and accidental coincidences, on which it is pointless to reflect further, but at that moment, I became wildly angry, grabbed Alik’s things, and carried them to Vinnitskaya Street. Alik was at the university, and I left a note in two words: “Return keys.” I did not return his phone calls or letters, just returning the latter unopened. Then he called my girlfriend Alka – with whom he had rather distant relations – passionately explaining the situation to her for over half an hour. The very fact that Alik, in all of his reserve, tried to explain something, which was weighing on his mind, was so huge that I immediately called him and only said, “Come back.” We never talked about this incident again – why should we? We knew what we needed to know.

* * *

If Chekhov was correct in saying that brevity is akin to talent, then this was true about Alik. I remember one case in the late 1970s. Winds of change were sweeping the times. A series of sharp articles appeared in the press. Someone once brought a fresh newspaper to work with something sensational in it. The paper passed from hand to hand, but I was called into the operation room, and later I had
to attend a patient in recovery. I only had time to call Alik and ask him to pick up Natasha from kindergarten. I returned home late that evening and said, “Do you know that there is an interesting article in Izvestiya?”

“I do. Here it is. I put it aside for you.”

“I have absolutely no time to read it. I have to urgently cook dinner for you two and then do the wash. Just tell me what it’s about.”

He was silent at first and then said a few phrases.

“And is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“But Alik, there is a whole large piece! What else is there?”

He thought a while and then said: “But I don’t think there is more there.”

But then I opened my mouth, “Of course, if it were Nikita, or someone else from amongst your smart mathematicians, you would have discussed this for hours, digesting every paragraph, but with me it is possible to get away with two sentences!”

As in Pushkin’s fairy-tale “the golden fish did not say anything, only waved its tail and swam out to the open sea...” Alik looked at me silently, shrugged his shoulders, and vanished into the next room to sit at his desk.

Having done what was absolutely necessary and could not be postponed till tomorrow, and having put Natasha to sleep, I finally got to the article. First I looked over it then carefully read it from the first line to the last. But I didn’t find anything that Alik had not noted! (I absolutely do not remember what was in it. Apparently the story was one-day news.)

There was nothing to do but go and apologize...

Brevity, apparently, also became Natasha’s inherited character. Once, during the first months of her doctoral work, Natasha complained that her advisors expressed dissatisfaction. They proposed that she and another student write an intermediary report about the work done to date. They went to the advisors together, who on accepting the papers, both noted, “It is immediately clear how much the young man has done; instead of bringing the required report
written in three pages, he brought one in four and a half. And what about you, Your Highness, you only worked to write on one and a half pages?”

Natasha explained with bitterness, “The second doctoral student gave me his report to read: he had familiarized himself with one article, decided to repeat the experiment described in it, and for this, took the alcohol, heated it above a beaker, then took into the pipette the solution, emitted out of it several extra drops, so that the solution would be exactly to the required mark, then released it into the beaker; and then, in just the same way, did the same with three other fluids; began to heat the mixture, and etc., then did not achieve the results described in the article. That’s all. And I wrote that I read fifteen articles, determined that the questions posed before me are similar to those being worked on in other laboratories around the world and are being interpreted in three different directions. In all these three directions, I carried out several preliminary experiments, picked the one that seemed to be the most promising to me, especially after a small alteration.” (Eventually, she received an invention certificate for this “small alteration”).

At the moment when Natasha was speaking a thought passed through my head, derived from Pushkin. Not all of Alik is dust. His spirit in Natasha will survive, safe from the worm...

* * *

Alik believed that a person who possesses a talent is responsible for it. He scolded me, “You have various and exceptional abilities. How can you permit yourself to neglect them?”

“Well, you will write on my tombstone the tomb of the unknown wasted talents,” I laughed it off.

Alik responded angrily and without humor, “You boast that you are not ambitious, but the reality is that this is your biggest fault.”

He viewed talent as something like public domain, which providence handed over to individuals, like precious grain handed over to

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16Echoing a line from A. Pushkin’s Exegi Monumentum, translated by Vladimir Nabokov. A more literal translation is: “Alik’s soul in Natasha will outlive mortal dust and will escape decay...” –Editor’s note
them for preservation, obliging them to sow these seeds and foster their growth, sacrificing their own strength, even their own life. And as a gardener shows off the fruits of his labor with pride, Alik felt it necessary for his scientific works to be valued. He was particularly ambitious and suffered from the vacuum in which he existed almost all of his creative life.

During the course of the past quarter century, so much has changed that even we, participants of this recent past, forget some of the details. While preparing these notes, I opened Alik’s archives and stumbled upon some papers which simply scream injustice about how sadly the “powers of restraint” behaved with him. In one statement to the editorial board of the journal Izvestiya Akademii Nauk, Series Mathematics, Alik writes that the editors had suggested that the article which he submitted to them be divided into several parts, since it was too long, and that it should be printed in its parts in separate but consecutive issues of the journal. When he divided the article into three parts, the first went to press six months after it was submitted; the second did not come out in the following issue as promised but nine (!) months later; and as for the last one, he never received an answer about when it would see the light of day. I present verbatim the end of his letter:

“The issues considered in the article have been intensely studied recently in physics, as well as in mathematical literature. I have no doubt that if my article is not published relatively soon, the findings reported therein will be repeated by somebody else in the USSR or overseas. I am an ordinary mathematician but do not consider that this circumstance can serve as the basis for improper treatment of my work. To my mind the proper treatment in this case would be as follows: the Editorial Board determines the fate of the article in a relatively short time, say, three to four months. And if the decision is affirmative the time from the moment when the article was received by the editors to its publication should not exceed the average for the journal...”

And such examples, unfortunately, are many. Once Alik told me, “I should live fifteen years in the future. Only in such a mode I am able to exist in science.”
When I asked why he had complications with the publication of his work, he answered that the country had two mathematical journals: one of which was anti-Semitic and, thus, did not publish the works of Jewish authors, while the other journal was headed by Gelfand with whom he had parted ways. I do not know the details of why he quarreled with Gelfand. Alik refused to talk about this topic. I think that both secretly regretted this extremely unfortunate event. My suppositions in relation to Gelfand are based on a time when Albert and Lucy Schwartz invited us and Natasha, still a school girl at that time, to Bure-s-sur-Yvette near Paris where Gelfand, who was also present, expressed the desire to meet with the daughter of Berezin; he conversed with her for about an hour, after which he said, “You have the same manner of thinking as your father. You can be a mathematician.” I interpret Gelfand’s gesture as a tribute to the memory of Alik. (But Natasha chose chemistry, “a field of science that is in the middle between father’s mathematics and mother’s medicine,” as she semi-jokingly explained her decision. It saddens me that during Natasha’s school years there was no one around to help her feel the beauty of mathematics.)

Alik’s fame came to him through physics, and this did not come about quickly. Once I asked him whether he had ever attempted to converse with Landau. His answer was, “Once, but it didn’t turn out too well; it is difficult for me to talk about it.”

Here I would like to say a kind word about Igor Kobzarev.\(^\text{17}\) He was amongst the first physicists who understood the significance of Alik’s work and did much to bring it to the attention of theoretical physicists.

Alik led a seminar which was attended by many people from the Physics Center in Chernogolovka.\(^\text{18}\) For Alik, this seminar was something sacred. Nothing, even for example the “trivial” issue of my dissertation defense, could bring him to cancel his seminar. He greatly

\(^{17}\) Igor Kobzarev (1932–1991), a theoretical physicist and a member of the ITEP Theory Department. – Editor’s note

\(^{18}\) Chernogolovka is a small town located 50 kilometers (30 miles) northwest of Moscow. That’s where the Landau Institute for Theoretical Physics headquarters were located, along with other Soviet research institutions founded after 1956. – Editor’s note
lacked personal contact with the leading scientists from abroad. Picking through his papers, I found an enormous file full of invitations from all over the world to work overseas. Amongst these invitations were a number of rather weighty and prestigious ones which gave honor not only to Alik but to Soviet science.

... One forgets now how much humiliation one had to endure while filling out the paperwork in order to travel abroad – all of these professional committees, party committees, regional committees... A mountain of forms had to be filled out, with nonsensical questions, requiring answers “did not” and “did not associate.” It would be good to write “member of the Party.”\footnote{The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the only one that existed in the USSR. – Translator’s note} But Alik did not want to join the Party, no privileges could tempt him to do so. And, thus, after all the humiliations and an enormous waste of time, the documents would be submitted to OVIR,\footnote{Department of Visas and Permits, a section of the Ministry of Interior Affairs which was in charge of exit visas. – Editor’s note} who would refuse him an exit visa, or simply never reply... Among the examples, I will mention only two of the most flagrant.

Alik’s trip to Poland was killed already at the level of the University under the pretext that at that moment he had three graduate students and, seemingly, they could not be left without an advisor, despite the fact that Alik’s stay in Vroclav would have been from May to December, an absence of one semester maximum. When he was invited to CERN\footnote{Centre Européenne pour la Recherche Nucléaire, European Organization for Nuclear Research. – Translator’s note} for a year and a half (he was offered to pick the length of his stay in Switzerland), the University could not officially refuse him this honorable invitation. After all the documents were sent off to OVIR, the University revoked Alik’s references which had been issued by the very same University! At this unusual development, even the seasoned workers of OVIR were surprised, as they told Alik that this was the first time that they had encountered such a thing! Recreating the atmosphere of those times, one has to remember that there was no Internet, thus, there was not even this
avenue for connecting to the outside world.

Alik suffocated in the nation of socialism whose face was so far from being human...

It was critical for him to know that someone expressed an interest in his work. I will relate one such episode. Once, late in the evening, he told me that the day after tomorrow he would have to finish a major project and, therefore, he would not answer the phone, asking me to pick it up and let him know who was calling so that he could determine whether to talk to that person or not. In the morning, Vitya Maslov called. Alik gave me a sign that he would take the receiver, and... talked for forty minutes! Thereafter, he sat without getting up from his desk for the rest of the day. I had to reheat his lunch twice. When we finally sat down at the kitchen table, Maslov rang again. Grabbing a piece of bread, Alik ran off to the other room and talked away for about an hour. To all of my gestures signifying that lunch was getting cold, he waved me off and signaled that E.A. and I should not wait for him. After eating, I left his food on the table and, angrily, went off to play with Natasha. Having sipped the cold soup, very pleased with himself, Alik appeared at the door and, as a sort of apology, explained that Vitya had become very interested in his work and decided to dedicate his whole day to studying it. In the morning, Alik sort of delivered to Vitya an introductory lecture, and, at midday, Vitya called to tell him that he had reached the middle of the text.

“In the evening, he will call me again when he is finished,” added Alik. He did not go for his evening stroll – he waited for the call. Maslov called late, and again they chatted for a long time. That night Alik slept well, wheezing away in his sleep with satisfaction. Apparently Maslov’s attention was a good substitute for the missed evening stroll.

...Well, my gratitude to Vitya that he was interested in Alik’s work while he was still alive...

* * *

At one time, a young, beautiful woman often came to see us. She eagerly exchanged pleasantries with me at the entrance, gave
Natasha some sort of toy, and then she and Alik would disappear into a room, closing the door tightly behind them, where they stayed for long periods of time. I had the right to clean, do the laundry, cook, go out for walks with Natasha, or put her to bed – no one bothered me with pulling behind myself all of the household chores. Finally, the door of the room would open, and the tired but satisfied pair appeared in the corridor. The woman would quickly say her farewells and leave while Alik sat down to dinner. Once after such a visitation, I said:

“However you look at it, you have an ideal wife.”

“The most important thing is that you think so,” smirked Alik.

“Yes, ideal,” I maintained. “Maybe for a normal man I am not at all satisfactory, but for you, ideal!”

“I repeat, the most important thing is that you think so.”

“But tell me, what kind of a wife would put up with her husband shutting himself up in a room for many hours with another woman?!”

This time, Alik took the time to explain. “The three of us – Renata Kalosh, Ogievitsky, and I – received an invitation to an international conference (congress? – I do not recall). This Ogievitsky and I, as Jews, naturally, were discounted right away; but Renata – the daughter of a Hungarian communist who was shot under Stalin, but now rehabilitated with honors – she is permitted to go. This Renata is an insightful specialist in her field, but she lacks a general scientific overview. This is the first time she is traveling abroad. She is very nervous. And I, so to speak, am trying to give her a crash course on the present state of scientific research.”

“Out of solidarity with you, she should have refused to go on this trip.”

“No, Renata is in no way a traitor. She understands our work and will present all three of our papers.”

“Still, this is not the same thing. She will not be able to present the papers as the authors would.”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, she will do it better than me. Renata had a good idea. In the beginning of her presentation she will write down on the board two formulas, one next to the other: what the situation was before and then my proposition. I would never have
thought of this myself," added Alik with obvious disappointment.

I attempted to comfort him. "Everyone’s his own: Renata – she is an artillery attack, but you – penetrating radiation."

* * *

Well, well, but a penetrating radiation he was. This was especially apparent from the time when he was no longer with us. Once a year on the 25th of May, for ten years before we left for France, I gathered all the people together who wanted to remember Alik. And with each year, there were larger groups gathering. And even during the old times, people I did not know at all came over to me simply to tell me how much they missed Alik...

Once Volodya Molchanov came and asked for a photograph.

"Do you know," he said to me, "we saw each other rarely and spoke on the phone or communicated by the post not very often. But now that he is no longer with us, I feel the need to at least see his face sometimes."

I gave Volodya the last, best, photograph of Alik. He is in Novosibirsk, by the blackboard, speaking with passion about one of his works which, finally, had captured the interest of the scientific community. Volodya had the photograph enlarged and made many copies which, at that time, was not at all as simple as it is today. I gave them away to close friends; this photograph is also on the jacket of the book which came out after Alik’s passing – *Introduction to Algebra and Analysis with Anticommuting Variables.*22

Natasha was twelve years old. We were spending the summer in Mikhalevo in the “House of Scientists.” Once the Mikhalevo society became very excited – a young theoretical physicist and doctor of science, recently transferred from Tomsk to Moscow, a bachelor, appeared there – wow, what a catch! He was placed at the directorial table where, thanks to my friendly relations with the directress, Natasha and I also sat. All of the Mikhalevo available beauties sat

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there, as well. After lunch, Ella said to me, “However you look at it, your daughter has an outstanding appearance. So many beautiful women were sitting at the table, but during the course of the entire meal, this young scientist did not shift his gaze from Natasha.”

“Well,” I smirked, “he does not look much like the hero of Nabokov’s Lolita. Most likely he had crossed paths with Alik within some sort of a mathematical circle, and since Natasha looks very much like her father, an association has formed now in the memory of this young man.”

“The things that you can invent simply do not fit through any barn doors.” Ella shrugged her shoulders.

During dinner, she demonstratively asked with an indifferent tone, “Tell me, Dima, does the name Felix Aleksandrovich Berezin mean anything for you?”

“Well, of course. I continuously use the findings in his book on the secondary quantization formalism and supermathematics in my work. The discussions, which I seldom had the opportunity to lead with him, always permitted me to find solutions to all my problems. Besides that, he was the opponent for my doctoral dissertation. Without him, this defense would not have been possible. For me, this is a person and scientist without equal. In general, I am a person who is not jealous, probably because I don’t have many complexes. But I always envied my Muscovite friends Tiutin and Voronov who had constant opportunities to attend Felix Aleksandrovich’s seminars and discuss various scientific issues with him.”

23The academic hierarchy in Russia follows the German rather than the Anglo-American pattern. An equivalent of the PhD in the US is the so-called candidate degree. The highest academic degree, doctoral (DSc), is analogous to the German Habilitation. Thesis defense in the Soviet Union was a lengthy and complicated procedure. Dissertations ready for defense were sent to the so-called official opponents – experts from other institutions – who were supposed to study them carefully and then present their critical evaluations on the day of defense. Thorough debate was supposed to follow, and only after that could the Scientific Council approve (or decline) the dissertation under consideration. In the case of approval, dissertations were then sent to Moscow to the Supreme Dissertation Council (VAC) for further consideration. VAC had the ultimate say: it could either confirm the degree sought, or veto the positive decisions of the local Scientific Councils. – Editor’s note.
“Well then, please meet his widow and daughter.”

“Here I am struggling – how do I know this girl?” exclaimed Dima.

“I just could not understand of whom she reminded me. But as it happens, I saw her when she was still very little when I came to Felix Aleksandrovich’s home in order to discuss my dissertation.”

Laughing, I said to Ella, “As you see, Bohr’s suggestion that a theory is correct if it is sufficiently crazy is valid not only for theoretical physics.”

After dinner, Dima came up to me and said, “May I go on a stroll with you? I very much want to talk about Felix Aleksandrovich.”

Thus, unintentionally, on this evening Natasha and I surpassed all of the Mikhalevo beauties.

Dima Gitman became a major friend at our home. He described to me how he had to defend his doctoral dissertation in Novosibirsk at the Institute of Nuclear Physics. This defense was hindered by a number of “nonscientific reasons.” Then Efim Samoilovich Fradkin informed Alik of the situation and asked him to be the opponent at this defense. It was believed that no guardian of racial purity could withstand such “heavy artillery” as the Berezin-opponent. Dima was shaken and endlessly thankful to Alik for consenting to be the opponent. It goes without saying that Alik fully probed into the essence of the work. I recall that Alik flew to Novosibirsk and was very satisfied with the results of his trip; as usual, he did not enlighten me with any details. Dima told me that their foresight was not without reason – one of the most influential members of the Scientific Council began his offensive against his dissertation on abstract problems of the quantum field theory with such questions as, “And how from all this can one get practical applications?” At the same time, Alik’s presentation in support of the work was so informal, succinct, and interesting from a scientific point of view, and, at the same time, diplomatic in relation to the “patriots,” that he immediately and sharply changed the atmosphere in the auditorium; the vote was unanimous.

Dima gave Natasha and me an audio cassette with a recording of this presentation. As far as I know, this is the only opportunity to hear Alik’s voice which, incidentally, was very beautiful – such a low
There are numerous examples of “the consequential effects” that ensued due to Alik’s interference.

In 1972, there was an international conference in Moscow. Alik said that he must meet with one of the foreign scientists who came to this meeting. At the end of the conference, I asked, “Did you talk to the person you wished?”

“Well, how should I say...” Alik shrugged his shoulders indeterminably.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Well, I asked my question during his presentation...”

“And?”

“He began to answer, then stopped and became quiet; as silence prevailed – a rather impressive silence – he then said that the question was very interesting, and that he couldn’t answer it on the spot, but after going home, he would certainly think about it. And when he thinks about it,” Alik said with his characteristic devilish smirk, “then he will understand that his entire construction falls apart...”

Once one winter when I was heavily pregnant, Alik decided to take me out of the city to breathe some fresh air. We rode in the commuter train and stood near the entrance. At some small station a skier popped in. Alik and the skier greeted each other and, without even thinking of introducing us, Alik said to him with great energy: “I was just thinking about your work...” And then followed the typical abracadabra.

... When Alik spoke to mathematicians, it seemed to me that if they conversed on “normal things” in Esperanto, I would have understood more than that Russian mathematical language they used. Still, I had a feeling that I understood their hierarchy of power. Although Alik spoke quietly and never raised his voice, he almost always was in the leadership position. And this is understandable – most of the time I heard his discussions with his students. But even when his colleagues from the university came to see us, Alik was in the leading role most often. My words are supported by at least the fact that the letter to the Dean written about the situation at Mekh-Mat (see Part III of this book) was discussed at our home by
the colleagues whom Alik gathered. Initially, this letter was planned to have been from the collective, but later it was decided that only Alik would sign it. For this letter, the university administration, as was often the case, had their revenge...

And here, near the entrance to the commuter train, I saw how Alik’s words made an impression on his acquaintance, as if he received a hit to his gut. He stood back, began to withdraw, but Alik, feeling satisfied by such an effect – not allowing the “rival” to come to his senses – continued the offensive. The skier took a deep breath, concentrated, and began a counteroffensive. And here the time came for Alik to withdraw... And the battle of the minds continued. In front of me was not a game of checkers or chess – this was not boxing or fencing, but an unknown Martian battle of Titans. Alik had encountered a worthy opponent, and I stood frozen, watching this duel as a die-hard fan cannot tear his eyes from the ring. Alik, however, without any doubt, was actually showing off in front of me. Because of this, an immediate payback came – he answered too quickly to some sort of contention from his opponent and, because of that, did not think things through enough. And here there was no mercy for him. I felt that I was distracting Alik’s concentration, and so I walked off into the car. When he came after me, Alik answered the question of “Who won?” with, “We did not finish talking since the train came to his station. But this is not important, since the most important thing is that he will have a chance to think about it.”

“And who was it?”

“Arnold.”

* * *

Concerning the relations Alik had with his students, unquestionably, they can speak about it better than I. I will only mention a few episodes.

A near total fiasco occurred with his first student. This was a young American who, upon first arriving to Moscow, was happy,

24Vladimir Igorevich Arnold, an outstanding Soviet mathematician best known for the Kolmogorov–Arnold–Moser theorem regarding the stability of integrable Hamiltonian systems (KAM theorem). – Editor’s note
energetic, and jumping with enthusiasm to work. But after a little while the young man began to somehow wither away, become sickly, and ceased to express any interest to work on proposed projects. Alik did not understand immediately that the reason was not in the American’s disenchantment with mathematics but that he was fading from hunger! Yes, in the center of Moscow, living at the university dormitories, the young man was starving. And the thing is that this had nothing to do with the absence of money, as he was from a very well-off family. Simply, it is that every time he came to the student dining hall, he encountered a long queue and, therefore, decided to come back later. But people stood in this line until closing. As for Soviet stores, aside from the queues, the American was scared off by the unappetizing appearance of the offered goods. Later, when all of this came to be known, measures were put into place (if I am not mistaken, the American was permitted access to the professors’ dining hall), and everything ended with an excellent finish for his term of study.

But Alik remembered this lesson for life and, for this reason, was extraordinarily attentive to his students. Numerous times he directed them to see me for medical consultations. As a rule, the young people did not have any organic illnesses – to a large or small degree, they suffered from what the French have so precisely christened as *mal de livre*, i.e. dissatisfaction with self and loss of one’s place in the surrounding world. They did not need a medical healer but a psychotherapist. But, since in those days such a profession practically did not exist in the USSR, I had to play the role of “self-taught Freud.” Usually as soon as the first positive results began to appear in their work, my patients magically recovered. And the credit for this goes not to me, but to advisor.

Very often, Alik helped his students not only in purely scientific explorations. Thus, for instance, one of them defected from the Soviet Union as he crossed the Finnish border in the region of Kolsky Peninsula on skis. Alik knew about this desperate act and was very worried until he received news, via underground channels, that the operation had been a success. When the young man was beyond the border, he was in need of a recommendation letter. And, when it was
possible, Alik sent along such a letter. In the situation that reigned in the country at that point, this was a truly brave act.

Once a foreign graduate student, an Egyptian Arab, came to Alik and said that he wanted to write his dissertation under Alik's direction. Alik was puzzled since he was not sure whether the Egyptian knew that he was choosing a Jew for his academic advisor. He attempted to convince him to appeal to other professors at the university under the pretext that the young man had weak preparation in his specialty and, therefore, he would not be able to finish his program in the standard three year period. But the graduate student answered that he wanted to work specifically under his guidance and was prepared to dedicate as much time as necessary; that he could choose any institution of higher learning but chose Moscow State because he had become acquainted with the works of Berezin and it was those areas of research that were of interest to him. Then Alik asked him a direct question, whether the young man knew that his advisor, in such a case, would be a Jew.

"I know everything about you," answered the young Arab, "even that you recently had a daughter."

In the course of the first two years, they spoke only of mathematics. Later, gradually, they began to touch upon various social and political questions. The Egyptian related that, in his country, there was no total anti-Semitism, that Sadat had signed a peace agreement with Israel not from the position "one against all else," but rather with the support of a specific strata of Egyptian intelligentsia.

When, at the end of his second year of studies as a graduate student, he was departing for his summer vacation and, unlike his advisor who could not go abroad, planned to tour around Europe, he asked what present from abroad would bring Alik the most pleasure. Alik answered that he would like to have a current edition of the Bible, since in our country at that time, the Soviet authorities did not permit publication of the Bible... And here is one of the paradoxes of the life we lived then – I was in my mid-thirties, and this was the first time I could hold a Bible in my hands, which an Egyptian Arab brought us from England!...

After the defense of his dissertation, the young man, who at that
time had already become the father of a family, said that, aside from
the usual banquet, he and his wife wished to come to our home and
celebrate the occasion in a closed circle (they lived at the university
dorms and could not invite us to their place). Furthermore, the wife
of the young candidate of sciences insisted that she prepare all that
was necessary for the celebratory table. They brought with them not
only victuals but their kitchen wares. When I returned from work,
the apartment was full of the delicious aroma of pilaf, the table was
laden with oriental dishes, and on the cupboard oriental desserts
awaited their proper hour. We had a splendid evening!

Dima Leites once told me, “Felix Aleksandrovich towers over us,
merely mortals, but often, after conversing with him, I begin to feel
better about myself.”

“There is a general rule for a teacher and doctor – after com-
municating with them, even the most unfortunate student (this, of
course, does not relate to you) or helplessly ill patient, at least for
some time, should feel better,” I noted.

Alik never permitted himself to have a condescending tone. He
had an amazing ability to push the person he was talking to, to
think. (I attempted to express this character trait in the dialogues I
had with him that I have recounted here – I do not know whether I
have succeeded).

As a rule, after finishing collaborative works with students or
younger colleagues, Alik maintained contact with them and warm
relations continued. I know of only one case of a total and absolute
break with a young mathematician, who, in the winter of 1975-76,
spent long hours at our place on Vinnitskaya Street, working with
Alik, and, after his immigration to the USA, decided to publish a
coauthored work there under his name, without the coauthor; he
informed Alik about this with a letter which he sent on the eve of his
immigration out of the USSR. I cannot express what Alik was going
through when he received this letter! I was afraid of a heart attack
due to nerves. One has to imagine the circumstances of those times:
Alik was denied the ability to travel abroad, and his works were
either not published or published with endless delays. Aside from
the nature of the situation, Alik was also disturbed by the manner
in which this was done. Probably only Natasha’s birth a week after this event saved Alik. What is more, the young man had no need to behave in such a manner, since Alik considered him a rather gifted mathematician and foretold that he would have a brilliant career if the circumstances were right, something that did indeed happen.

I do not want to end my stories about his students and young coworkers on a negative note and would end with pleasure with several more words.

Alik met Misha Shubin and Grisha Litvinov at a mathematical school near Baku. The three of them were placed in one room, and, after several evening conversations before going to sleep, Alik suddenly proposed to Misha and Grisha that they write a book together. This work was never finished, but the relationships that sprouted, one may say absolutely unexpectedly, always remained very deep.

After Alik’s passing, Grisha came to our home and offered to teach Natasha mathematics. This did not last long and it was apparent why: the psychological foundation was incorrect, since both Grisha and Natasha were looking for Alik in each other. But this pain Grisha had, I recall even now...

Misha did quite a lot for Alik. After Alik’s death, he arranged the translation of their book on the Schrödinger equation which had been previously released in Russian by Moscow University.\textsuperscript{25} Due to Shubin’s efforts and those of his colleagues, several collections of scientific works were prepared and published and dedicated to Alik’s memory. Without the gentle but determined pressure of Misha and Albert Schwarz, this memoir of mine which you read now would never have been written.

When Alik first invited me to his place, there was a huge celebration. He gathered his friends to celebrate the release of Lectures on Statistical Physics.\textsuperscript{26} On the table stood absolutely inedible wonders

\textsuperscript{25} F. A. Berezin and M. A. Shubin, Lectures on Quantum Mechanics, (Moscow State University Press, 1972), Expanded version was published in Russian in 1983 under the title Schrödinger Equation. English translation: F. A. Berezin and M. A. Shubin, Schrödinger Equation, (Kluwer, 1991). —Editor’s note

\textsuperscript{26} F. A. Berezin, Lectures on Statistical Physics, in Russian (Moscow State University Press, 1972). In 2002 the Second Edition was published by the Izhevsk Institute of
purchased in the Soviet stores, amidst which stood out pleasantly a very delicious beet salad (vinegret) and French salad (olivye) which had obviously been prepared by Masha Shubin. Masha herself was not there – at that time she was still a breastfeeding mother who, after preparing everything before the guests’ arrival, went off to be with the baby.

Later, when Natasha was born, the Shubins passed on children’s strollers, clothing, and toys to us. Alik and I were old parents, and the children of his students turned out to be our daughter’s peers. Masha, as a more experienced mother, gave me wise advice on how to take care of Natasha. Our daughters, after they grew up, became friends. Fate has now scattered them to different countries and continents, but they maintain good relations. But in our Moscow life all of the birthdays were celebrated together. Once, after Alik’s passing, we were invited to Galya’s birthday – Shubin’s youngest daughter. At the height of the celebration, there was a power outage. Masha sighed that she would be unable to feed the children – all sorts of bliny (crepes/pancakes) were planned, but the stove was electric. Candles were lit. The children were handed out dry cookies and candy. Masha and I conversed in low tones in the kitchen. Misha was telling something to the children in the other room as they sat there quietly chewing the cookies and playing with the wrappers from the candy. It was cozy, warm, and quiet. And it seemed to me that the power outage was not accidental, that Alik’s soul was there, with us, hovering around the apartment, hiding in the trembling shadow from the flickering candlelight...

* * *

But that was later, later... Now, at this moment, the plane was going to land. We were arriving in Krasnoyarsk.

Krasnoyarsk – Magadan

Krasnoyarsk, Siberia... One imagines something huge, powerful. But the airport turned out to be small and cozy, something like

Computer Research. –Editor’s note
an Aeroflot village depot. The airplane taxied almost to the arrival hall, where we had the chance to disembark and stretch a bit after the lengthy journey. Through the bulletproof glass, which separated the passengers from the airstrip, we could see a refueling truck driving up to the plane. At the same time, the baggage began to be unloaded in the most basic way – the door was opened and baggage was tossed down to the ground. The young tourists, laughing and joking, began to drag their kayaks out of the general pile of items. I watched them and mentally saw them off with the words of the song which they had sung during their journey:

“It’s time for goodbye, my boys ... it’s time for goodbye, my girls. You must try, you must try to return...”

The young people were going camping, while I was traveling further and thinking how I should tell another girl that she would never see her father again...

* * *

From the moment we started to get closer, Alik wanted a child, but I did not. I had no maternal instinct. Alik was disappointed and upset by this. But I was not ready to give in.

“But you would not change your everyday priorities,” said I. “You would continue to work 36 hours a day, and all the work with the child would rest on me. Of course, I am not as important of a scientist as you are, but I do love my work, and I am satisfied with the lifestyle I lead presently. Furthermore, we are already old – where were you before? You should have had children with the women who came before me.”

“If I were woman, I would have had not just children but grandchildren by now!” Alik once replied to one of my tirades with an excitement unusual for him.

Our days of youth were far behind. I had turned thirty-six years old, and Alik was forty-three. This was not the first year we were together ... and I relaxed too much and was off-guard. But nature,
as is known, does not tolerate when one neglects to take care of oneself...

During the first half of August 1975, we spent time together at a village near Dubna; then Alik remained there to work while I left to go to Bulgaria with a tour group. When I returned, everybody noted that I had never looked that good before. I felt myself somehow rejuvenated. I felt that some sort of joyfulness had descended on me. I liked everything, and I was pleased with everything. I did not notice any disturbance in my physiological functions, believing that this state was brought on by the changes in climatic conditions. Among the first to notice that something unusual was happening to me was our friend Lyonya. We were strolling along with him at Kolomenskoe, and Lyonya inquired, “What’s going on? Where is your sharp wit, where is the nonstandard thinking? What are you doing with me today, feeding me sweet pleasantries instead of a substantive conversation?!”

“Well, listen,” I answered, “you always scold me for being critical of everything. For the first time in my life I am satisfied with everything and, once again, this is bad for you.”

“Well, this is simply not you!” Lyonya continued to be amazed and, stepping two strides away so as to look at me better, questioningly asked, “Perhaps you are pregnant?”

“Pregnancy or menopause – that is the question,” I laughed.

At that time, the answer to this eternal question was an absolute “to be” – a new life was born inside of me. A feeling of absolute harmony with the outside world penetrated my entire being. At that time, I said that I had discovered a remedy from all conflicts and wars – the entire planet should be pregnant. It is only too bad that any pregnancy eventually ends.

From that moment when I was with child, Alik began to try to convince me to move in with them on Vinnitskaya Street. I did not want to move, but succumbed to the arguments – this way or that way, I felt good about everything. I loved everybody, even E.A.; and Alik expressed a mindless hope that we would all get along. Indeed, at that time, nothing irritated me, and I only had one determination – that life would be just as beautiful for everybody as it was for
Lyonya proclaimed, “Remember 1976! This is the year of your wisdom.” As if being wise is that simple: just a bit of a sober thought plus a whole lot of kindness and patience... The only question is, where does one get this patience for their entire life?

Looking back at that period, I think that it was not only my happiest time, but also the most significant in my life. What if I had been sent to this earth to bear Alik’s child? Peace and satisfaction settled in my soul, in my subconscious; there was a feeling of fulfillment of fate. And it seemed that everything was against it: Alik and I were so different, no longer young, not intending to live together, and I did not actively wish to have children. But everything turned out to be the opposite. It seemed as if someone, somewhere had decided everything for us and led us along a path, which we did not choose ourselves, with a firm hand...

From the moment of Natasha’s birth, she resembled her father uncannily. While still in the maternity ward, I wrote (at that time fathers were not permitted at births, as they are now), “If you had decided to reproduce by way of spores (cloning was not known then), then why am I lying here on this post-birth bed? You should have given birth yourself.”

This resemblance between Natasha and Alik was retained forever, in character as in outward appearance – there is nothing there from me. I joked, “If men could give birth, then I would know for sure that you cheated on me.”

From the very beginning, there existed some special connection. If Natasha cried, Alik knew better than I why: Does she want to eat, does she need to be changed, or does her stomach ache. She quieted down more quickly in his arms. He knew whether she was warm or cold, which shirts and footsy pajamas needed to be put on her. My mother was amazed, “You are a woman and a doctor, so why do you constantly consult with Alik how to take care of the child?”

“Because he understands better what she needs.”

Once when Natasha was about a year old, on entering the room, I found the following picture: Natasha was standing in her crib, and Alik was standing still next to her. Father and daughter were looking at each other attentively, eye-to-eye.
“I just found an answer to the question about which I have been thinking for so long, and when I looked at Natasha, she understood me,” said Alik. “You did not, but she understood.”

His words did not provoke laughter in me: God knows them, what they understood about each other; they had a special plane to which I had no access.

Alik had his own way of preparing for the birth of the child: he read books about caring for and bringing up children. He had the idea to teach Natasha how to swim in infancy. So, at four months old, Natasha, with obvious pleasure, not only splashed in the water during bathing, but also “covered” the entire length of the bathtub while swimming. (In the aftermath, I was afraid that the fact that her father drowned would initiate a fear of water in her, but Natasha feels like a fish in water – Alik had time to teach her.)

If they played together, it was impossible to determine who was having more fun. During those ten, fifteen minutes, for which he tore himself away from work, he could entertain her in such a way that, later, when he sat behind his desk, Natasha continued to play by herself for hours. Unlike E.A. and myself, she was permitted to be present in the room when he worked – she did not distract or irritate him.

Natasha remembers numerous episodes of their relations, which slipped away from me, and unquestionably she can describe much better about all of this than I, all that relates to them. The birth of the child, in many ways, bettered Alik. He became softer, more peaceful, and less reserved. Natasha domesticated him.

When she was three years old, we rented a dacha on the shore of the Moscow River. Once she and Alik went off to swim in the river. Having finished my domestic chores, I went to them. On coming to the river, I heard Natasha’s loud screaming. Stumbling down the cliff, I saw Natasha’s weepy face and next to her Alik frantically running around her, totally at wits end.

“What is it? What happened?”

“I don’t know myself. We were playing in the water, and then, as usual, I left Natasha on the shore and went off to swim by myself. As usual, I went into the water, dove in, and then when I swam out,
I found Natasha wailing at the top of her lungs.” Our daughter was a very quiet child, so such behavior was absolutely unusual.

“Little one,” (that’s how Alik always called Natasha), “what is wrong with you?”

“Father disappeared, Father is gone,” and Natasha would not calm down.

... A year later Alik drowned...

What was this? An accidental coincidence? Foreboding?

And now before me lay the need to tell Natasha that her father would never return from camping.

“One would not tell a four-year-old child that her father is dead?!” mother asked me this rhetorical question.

“Well, how can I lie? Later when she finds out, she will never trust me again.”

It is one thing to make a decision; it is another to carry it through. I racked my brain, what words would I find to prepare Natasha for the news – to let her know that we had become orphaned. Not coming up with anything, I ordered myself, “You will think about this tomorrow. Today’s problem is to bring Alik out of Magadan.”

Magadan – Seymchan – Magadan

In Magadan, Misha Gelman greeted me, crushed by grief at what had happened. This was Alik’s friend from the school bench. After having brilliantly completed his studies at a Moscow institute, there was no placement closer to Moscow than Magadan for this young physicist, Misha Gelman. There, Misha married, settled, and began to live his life. He worked at the Magadan Institute of Geophysics. It was with him that Alik began to correspond concerning finding a partner with whom to go camping. That year, all of the usual camper-friends had somehow run off somewhere and the group was not forged. Alik had been wanting to go to the Far East for a long time. And here a great opportunity opened up – Misha learned about a group of geologists who needed an assistant. With happiness, Alik seized this chance. And now I remember the sorrow Misha experienced, and his feeling of guilt in having organized Alik’s participation.
in this damned geological expedition. I had to calm Misha down by saying that he was not responsible for anything – Alik wanted this himself and was very happy that he ventured out to such a distant place.

The expedition was based not in Magadan, but in the settlement of Seymchan which was located, as Misha stated, “here, not far, some four hundred fifty to five hundred kilometers.” Well, by Siberian standards, this is a stone’s throw away. One had to travel there on a small local airplane. Fortunately, it departed in some twenty minutes, and Misha was waiting for me with the ticket in hand. One more hour on the road, and finally I arrived at the end point of my journey.

Forewarned by Misha’s telegram, the base manager greeted me in Seymchan. I assumed that we would immediately go to Alik, but the manager said that he would first take me to his home so that I could leave my things and wash up after such a long journey. There, he passed me from his hands to the hands of his wife and then left. The wife did not enter into any long conversations, just showed me where I should place my bag and where to wash. When I exited the bathroom, fresh brewed tea awaited me on the table. The manager’s wife said, “I know that now you do not want to eat anything, but you must drink some bilberry tea with sugar so as to fortify yourself somehow.”

The housewife poured some tea for herself as well, but drank hardly any as she simply sat behind the table and occasionally gazed at me with attentive but not obliging eyes. I asked her whether she knew Alik, and she answered that she had seen him several times and that everybody liked him at the base. She was a woman of few words, and I was grateful that she did not attempt to maintain a mundane conversation for the sake of appearance. When I finished the tea, the wife told me to follow her into the other room where a blanket and pillow, that were prepared for me, lay.

“But I do not want to rest at all. Please take me to my husband.”

“You need to gain strength and be in the proper form. This will be the last visit with him since afterwards the coffin will be nailed shut. At least wait until the noise in your ears subsides.”
“But I don’t have any noise in my ears. There is something like a siren sounding, but this is an external noise. A noise in the ears is not at all like that.”

“No, I assure you, it is absolutely silent here. That is a sound in your head.”

“How can you know what is in my head?”

“I know,” she said calmly but firmly.

She dealt with me as if she were dividing dough – accustomed, aloof, without extra words or gestures. And, like kneaded dough, I obeyed. Before slipping into an uneasy slumber, I thought: “Where does such know-how come from? Do people die like flies here?”

I don’t know how long I slept. The wife came into my room at exactly the same time as I opened my eyes.

“Well, here, now you are ready,” she said. “My husband will come for you momentarily.” Then she added, “Perhaps while he is on his way, you will eat something?”

“No, no, thank you. I do not want anything. And you were correct – now I hear no siren.”

“Let’s go and drink some tea.”

Soon the base manager appeared. Unlike his wife, he was obviously under stress. It turned out that we first had to meet with the Procurator.  

“But why do I need to see the Procurator? What dealings do I have with him?” I began to feel impatient, as there seemed to be endless delays.

“Such is the rule of things. Your husband was signed up in the geological expedition as an assistant, and his death falls under the category of a work-related accident. It is imperative to follow through with the formalities.”

The Procurator turned out to be a handsome young man of Caucasian descent wearing a blue uniform. He was concentrated, strap- ping, and his muscles bulged under his skin. The Procurator said that

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28 The same as District Attorney in the US. –Editor’s note

29 In Russia “Caucasian” is narrowly applied to people coming from the Caucasus Mountains – Georgians, Armenians, Azeri and a few smaller ethnic groups, such as Chechens. –Editor’s note
an investigation had been carried out, which ruled that Alik’s death was accidental, and that no one was personally responsible. Another woman sat in the office who was introduced by the Procurator as a court medical examiner. The woman confirmed that there were no traces of wounds or bruises on the body.

“But I don’t care what caused this. The only thing that counts is that he is no longer here. Even if you had brought before me someone and said, ‘Here is his murderer,’ I would feel just the same. It is you, there – judiciary and militia\(^\text{30}\) carry out an investigation and, if necessary, prosecute ... And for me, nothing makes any difference.”

The Procurator’s face smoothed out, and the muscle bulges disappeared.

“So, should we close the investigation? You, indeed, will not demand a complete inquiry?” He could not conceal his sigh of relief.

“What for? Is this something that could bring him back to life?”

“Well, in that case, sign right here that you do not have any claims.”

And he said it just like that: claims! Some formulaic document was placed before me and, without looking, I signed.

“We will prepare your husband according to all the rules, the base will provide a wooden, as well as a zinc, coffin, and you will have to pay only for transport!” the Procurator declared with an almost happy voice.

Finally, the formalities were over. I was led into a room where the coffin was.

... Alik lay all tanned, looking thinner and younger than when he had left Moscow. The bronze color of his skin set off his grey hair which had grown longer and, due to this, looked more beautiful than ever. The expression on his face showed concentration and looked sterner than before. The softness so typical to people from the intelligentsia had disappeared as the internal hardness of the character became more pronounced. He had never seemed to me so beautiful as that last time.

I sat down on a chair which had been kindly put out for me, and

\(^{\text{30}}\)Soviet police. –Translator’s note
looked at him for some time – without thoughts or feelings. And then I told him everything. I told him all the things that I did not say during life – how much I loved him, how I had planned to live very long with him, how carefully I had preserved various secrets “for later” when we were old so as to have something to tell him in retirement.

“Why did you leave?” I said to him. “You don’t even know at the end what a woman I am. I took so much care to keep our passion unabated, to make sure that our desire didn’t fade away into a habit, like brushing your teeth before going to bed. What am I to do with this now, where should I place all of this?...”

I did not even once touch him, as I did not wish to feel the cold body from which his life had exited. My fingers kept his warmth. And I promised to myself that I would raise Natasha in accordance with the principles he had laid down, preserve his manuscripts, and that I would not desert his mother...

After some time, some people came in and said that it was time to close the coffin with zinc sheets. And I, if I so desired, could speak with the geologists who were with Alik in the expedition.

There turned out to be two geologists. They were both men about thirty years old, who were just as tanned as Alik, but alive. They were very nervous, simply shaking. I found out that the group consisted of four people – two geologists and two assistants. One of these assistants was Alik, while the second was a schoolboy who had just finished the ninth grade. In the evenings, while resting, Alik would toss out various problems for him to solve. The teenager discovered for himself mathematics, which he had never seriously considered before. They became closely tied to one another and had planned to continue contact after the expedition and, if everything went according to plan, after finishing school, the boy would apply to Mekh-Mat.

“The kid is in a very depressed state, but if you want, he will come to talk with you,” the geologist offered.

“Well, why traumatize the kid even further? And, concerning mathematics, well, this I unfortunately cannot help him with.”

A thought passed through my mind: “Here is one more for whom
an encounter with Alik was, perhaps, a decisive moment, and his sudden departure from life may turn out to be unfulfilling for the youth.”

The geologists told me about the outing. First, in a helicopter, they were dropped off deep in the taiga. Then, traveling lightly, they moved by foot along a planned route. These were absolutely virgin areas. During the entire period (four weeks!), they encountered no human traces, not a single human place of habitation, nor a single living human soul. However, once at sunrise a bear came up to the tent in which they slept. They heard its grunting, and were greatly afraid, despite the fact that they had a rifle, but none of them was a real hunter. Luckily, the bear went away on its own. The journey went unusually smoothly. All the work went according to schedule, as they fulfilled their missions and moved further along the taiga. According to the plan of the expedition, food and equipment was dropped off for them from a helicopter at a number of predetermined points on the map. This was not an easy task, to find the drop offs in the middle of the dense forest, but luck prevailed. Twice during the time of their journey, the helicopter was able to land, so as to collect the mineral samples they had collected. (I knew about this – I had received several short notes from Alik by post.) The last day they were supposed to descend down the Seymchan River and, that very same evening, Alik was planning to fly home. Without much difficulty, they found the rubber inflatable boat, also dropped to them from the helicopter, which they inflated, and began to go down the river.

The river turned out to be very rough, full of rapids, with numerous meanders, covered by tree trunks and branches in many places along its course. Therefore, it was necessary to disembark and to portage the boat by hand. On one of the consecutive turns, the boat’s front got caught in the falls and capsized. Three of them jumped to shore and, not seeing Alik, at first did not even understand that tragedy had struck. They began to call for him, but no one answered them. Then they began to look for him, but there was no one near. They found Alik about forty minutes later, on the next bend to which the course of the river took him. But it was
too late... Everything had happened very quickly. When the boat capsized, Alik found himself in the water, and he was dragged under the falls. There, under the thick layer of trees, he apparently became disoriented and could not swim out...

In such a way, the eyewitnesses explained to me how he died... They gave me his half-empty backpack and wristwatch. Inside the backpack was a little book written in French by Anatole France, who was one of his most beloved authors.

... Alik had a talent of traveling minimally, something that allowed him to often carry the things of other people. In addition, something useful, like, for example, a flashlight or a needle with thread, was never forgotten. There is one very amusing photograph – he and Nikita Vvedenskaya, at an outing, are walking one after another – Nikita’s backpack is twice the size of Alik’s. Natasha inherited this characteristic from him – when we travel somewhere together, she has half of the things that I do...

Thereafter, Alik and I flew back. We were sent on a cargo plane to Magadan. Some ten people flew with us. In principle, the airplane was not designed for transporting people, but it was equipped with reclined seats which were bolted to the sides of its belly; thus, we sat in two rows facing each other, as one sees parachutists in movies sitting before jumping off the plane. In the middle, at our feet, lay the coffin. The passengers were workers from the geological base. They were flying to the “Large Land” on vacation and were happy in anticipation of relaxation. This coffin, with the accompanying woman, was rather out of place...

When, in Magadan, I exited the airplane and walked into the airport, there was Misha, and Victor Palamodov jumped at me with greetings (Palamodych – as Alik came to call him). We barely knew each other. Taken off-guard in the first moment, I didn’t even recognize Vitya.

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31 Anatole France (1844–1924) is a famous French writer. His most celebrated novel, La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédaque (At the Sign of the Reine Pédaque) is a vast tableau of life in eighteenth century France. –Editor’s note

32 Mainland Russia. –Translator’s note
“I was sent by the university. Everyone is in absolute shock at what has happened, and I wanted to personally express from myself to you ...”

I looked at him, and my glance undeniably expressed: “Shut up.”

No sorrowful words, please; otherwise all that will be left of me will be a wet spot!

Palamodych understood and stopped mid-sentence. They told me that the coffin would be reloaded into an airplane headed for Moscow departing in an hour, and, in this way, we would fly further without delay. Misha ran off to straighten out some issues while we remained at the entrance of the boarding area to wait. Having been interrupted mid-word, Palamodych did not dare to open up his mouth. He had sort of a strange appearance – in his beautiful chestnut hair, with noticeable locks of grey streaks, protruded reddish-orange strands. So, as to somehow dissolve the heavy silence, I asked him:

“What is wrong with your head?”

“You know, right now it’s summer vacation, and I was playing dress-up with the children. I was called from the university and told of what had happened right at the moment when my daughter was dyeing my hair with henna. I rinsed off my head, grabbed my passport and backpack, and ran off to the university and then to the airport. Only in the airplane did I discover that the dye did not come off,” said Vitya, who became incredibly embarrassed that he accidentally touched upon a forbidden topic.

... And I even now still see him in the middle of the Magadan airport – a red-haired clown with a tragic face...

Then Misha came up to us with an airport serviceman. They said that the coffin could not be brought on board the airplane because the baggage compartment was full, and that it would be sent off with the morning flight. Nothing could be done, and we had to be delayed overnight. Misha suggested we go to his place, but I asked to be left alone at the hotel, to which they, with hidden relief, agreed. For people who are not used to death, a person in grief is as an invalid amidst healthy people; they felt uneasy. It is not clear how one should behave – to attempt to falsely cheer up or willingly risk the choice of what can be discussed and what can’t be. Of course, it is
best of all to drink to oblivion, but is this appropriate to do in front of a newly created widow who, after all, is an absolutely unknown person? There was one more thing – I felt that they wanted to discuss what actually happened, since there were many unknowns in the whole story.

Alik was an experienced and careful rafter – what happened, why, out of the four people, was he the only one who died - someone who sat at the helm, in other words, furthest from the falls? After all, I didn’t want to figure out anything in detail. In light of the horror and the irreversibility of what had happened, I did not wish to disturb Alik’s soul with a petty, sickening investigation which could not change the tragic end. It was easier for me to think that this was a quirk of fate and not someone’s evil will...

Misha and Vitya left for the city, and I remained to stay the night at the hotel. There was no sleep. The strange excitement would not leave me, as I continuously attempted to imagine how it was under the log heap in the water. It seemed to me that with just a little bit more effort, my eyes would see all that Alik went through in the last moment.

Did he understand that he was dying?
What did he wish for?
What was his last thought? ...

Answers to these questions I do not have even today...
And there were still some moot vagaries – partial questions which I tried to banish from my mind – why was the manager of the base so nervous?; why could the Procurator not hide his worry?; why did the geologists simply shake from fear? And this wisdom and experience the manager’s wife had about death...

Many, many years since then, I have carefully examined Alik’s watch which was given to me along with his backpack. It had stopped on the twelfth. But I was told that the boat capsized on the fourteenth. Why? Alik was very keen with time. This watch, for us rather expensive, he had bought rather recently and was very pleased with it – it worked beautifully. The difference in two days could not be accidental. What happened in actuality? If one were to continue thinking in this direction, his last note to me, which was sent to me
from Seymchan, also reads differently. In the first, he wrote that he was very pleased with the expedition, and there were several tender words towards all members of the family. In the second, very short letter, he wrote only about E.A.; he worried very much about her, requested me to take care of her, as if he felt that he would not return and knew that I would not leave Natasha, but his mother – he asked me...

Once, while living in France, I turned on the television, which I normally rarely watch, and found a program about Russia. There was a report about none other than the Seymchan geological station! The program showed an abandoned settlement, which at one time had been a flourishing station, but which had since ceased to exist. What is this? – an accidental coincidence that, unfortunately, is now common and which is to be found throughout the whole country, or a sign sent to me of God’s punishment?...

But I do want to believe that it all happened as the geologists related to me, that in the last month of his life, Alik was happy. As I told the people of Seymchan at that time: “If this had to happen, then it’s good that it occurred at the end of the expedition and not at its beginning”...

...Alik always had new ideas during his down time; after camping, he jumped to the blank sheet of paper as if he were hungry, as to a morsel of bread.

“What were you thinking about, Alik, as you sat on the helm of the rubber boat; what did you think of, what did you discover?”...

Magadan – Moscow

In the morning, Palamodych and I were the first at the entrance to the plane. We were the first to enter. The passengers following us quickly filled the airplane “up to the knot,” as they say. Then we all sat for a long time, waiting for takeoff, but something delayed the departure. Finally, two stewardesses appeared in the aisles. They walked directly to Palamodych and me and, very politely, invited us to follow them into the exit of the airplane and then, just as politely, to descend from the airplane to the ground. There, on the landing strip, awaited two airport service people who explained that
the coffin did not fit into the baggage compartment because it had been loaded last, and the baggage of the other passengers was placed in such a way that it did not allow enough space for the casket. When we understood the situation, it was already too late to complain and to be indignant – our airplane was already rolling down the runway. Apologies were extended to us, and we were told that next time, i.e. on the night flight, the loading of the baggage would begin with the coffin and they suggested we spend several hours in the hotel, until the arrival of the plane from Moscow.

I felt slightly faint. Between Moscow and Magadan there are eight time zones, and my biological rhythm had been broken. I could not have said for how many days I had neither slept nor eaten. Palamodych was more composed than I and decisively said that we had to go and eat. There was no restaurant or canteen at the airport, only a buffet, where mainly vodka was sold, but boiled chicken legs were also being offered. Without asking me about anything, Palamodych took two portions. And it was then that I realized that I was very hungry. With greed, I jumped on those drumsticks, and I felt very embarrassed of my animal appetite – well, how could I eat when Alik was dead?! And as if to oneself, I gave an indulgence – it was necessary to get nourishment since, otherwise, there would not be enough strength to get to Moscow. “But, in memory of that weakness, I will never again put chicken in my mouth!” I quieted my conscience.

... However it may be – now I do eat chicken once in a while... Everything passes... well, but not without a trace...

Later, at the hotel, we slept like the dead; we would get up, go to the buffet, eat those same chicken legs, and then go back to sleep. Several times, the administrator knocked at the door and asked whether we were ready to vacate the room, since passengers from the Moscow flight had arrived, and the hotel was fully booked. In the end, we left the room to the happiness of its next occupants who were standing outside the door.

When, at the airport, we gave our ticket for registration, it turned out that we had long been expected, and immediately, before the announcement for boarding, we were led to the airfield. There, next to the airplane, stood a transport vehicle with Alik’s coffin. The
embarrassed airport attendants said that they especially brought us here to show that they had attempted to do all that they could in their power – the loading of the baggage on this flight, indeed, began with the coffin, but its dimensions did not fit the standard, and it did not fit into the airplane – it was impossible to bring in and turn around the coffin, so as to place it alongside the area of the baggage compartment, since it turned out to be too long; for this same reason, it could not be left in the perpendicular position since then the doors of the plane would not close... Yes, the people of Seymchan were not stingy with material for Alik, the large zinc bed was made for him! ...

We were assured that this could be rectified on the following morning when the workshops would be open, and then the zinc cover will be shortened and made smaller on the sides. It was senseless to return to the hotel, since we knew that there were no vacant rooms, so we went off on the transport vehicle, along with the coffin, to the warehouse.

The warehouse was, in actuality, a fenced-in area on the airfield, inside of which was wooden flooring covered by a canopy approximately 200 × 15 meters, occupied by cargo that had arrived by plane, and some twenty meters away from this site stood the night watchman’s stand.

There were three night watchmen. They played cards and gnawed on apples. They offered some apples to us, saying that they would rot anyway at the warehouse. But we were not permitted to stay at the watchmen’s stand, because this was prohibited by the rules, as it was explained to us. In reality it was clear what the situation was – why the hell would they need in their warm company these two funeral party members. Oh, well, it was possible to understand them. They had already expressed extreme kindness as they found a place under the canopy for the coffin. We went there ourselves and settled down near Alik. It was dark, quiet, and damp. A warm drizzle was coming down. We sat amidst cardboard boxes with refrigerators, televisions, and some other appliances. Almost all of the equipment was placed under the canopy – only a few boxes here and there stood in the warehouse yard under an open sky. There, also, stood uncovered wooden crates of apples. These apples had begun to rot under the
rain, and a sweet, suffocating smell emanated from them. I imagined how these apples had been brought on a train from Moldavia or the Crimea to Khabarovsk and then transported by plane here. And now they were rotting.

“Well, what kind of economy can withstand such a thing?” I thought. “And what pain this scene would bring to Alik’s soul.”

* * *

I do not know whether Alik could foresee that the USSR would collapse during our generation, but the fact that the economy was taking its last breath, that the country was irreversibly moving into a dead end, he knew very well. He perceived what was happening as a personal deadly disease. A Jew according to his passport, he felt that Russia was his only motherland and was tied to it with all the passion of his soul. With unspeakable pain, he spoke of how predatorily the forests were being chopped down and the rivers silted in, how nature cannot survive this debacle brought on it by the Soviet bureaucrats who do not value anything and feel no responsibility for what they do.

Once he came home in a state of significant excitement and distress. “I received an offer to leave the university and fully switch to ecology. They offer a pile of money and paid trips wherever and for however long I want. So what do you think?”

“A pile of money would be very useful for us and, with a formal obligation to travel throughout the country, you would feel morally at ease to escape from your dear mommy. But all of this governmental concern about ecology is totally superficial. The last say will always belong to someone ‘from the top.’ At this time, you only confront the university administration, and, even so, how many nerves you waste at this. At least you sit behind your writing desk and feel like a free person and do not depend on anybody. Working in ecology, you would be tied by your arms and legs, you will be constantly struggling, worrying, but still unable to do anything.”

As always, silence was an answer to me. Alik walked off to think in the other room... He did not leave the university...

* * *
It was not only the misfortunes of Russia that Alik perceived as his personal sorrow. It was as if he held his hand on the pulse of the planet, and each of its disasters he felt as a blow made against him personally. I will describe one of the many instances which I had witnessed.

Once he and I were strolling through the forest and were, as I felt, in a wonderful state of spirits. I was taking in the scenery of the various flowers, foliage, and butterflies all around. With a sudden glance at Alik, who was as usual deep in thought, I suddenly discovered that he had a very anguished face.

“What happened? What is wrong?”

“Well, how can I be happy, and even simply live in peace, when at this very time, Pol Pot is destroying millions of people. The world ‘did not notice’ when there was a genocide of the Armenians in 1915, then the destruction of the Jews during WWII, and now, the same thing is going on in Cambodia, but the world community, as before, only stands idly and watches…”

... Everything touched him, he filtered everything through himself...

* * *

When people of our circle began to leave the country, speaking of himself, Alik said, “I will go in the last wagon of the last train, but only if I am deported. Instead of America or Israel, I choose Birobidzhan.”

33Pol Pot was the ruler of the Khmer Rouge and the Prime Minister of Cambodia from 1976 to 1979. During his time in power Pol Pot instigated a policy of mass extermination of intellectuals and other “bourgeois enemies” in an attempt to purify the Cambodian people as a step toward a communist future. –Editor’s note

34Forced mass evacuation and related deaths of million plus Armenians during the government of the Young Turks from 1915 to 1917 in the Ottoman Empire. –Editor’s note

35Birobidzhan is the administrative center of Jewish Autonomous Province in Soviet Far East. This Province was established in 1934 as a culmination of Stalin’s “theatrical” project to provide a home for Jews in the Soviet Union. No mass Jewish migration ever took place. At the maximum about 40000 Jews lived there. In late 1936 the project came to a crashing halt with the onset of Stalin’s mass purges. The entire region was declared out of bounds for normal citizens and NKVD (the Soviet Secret Police) was given control of it. Currently it is an underdeveloped area of Russia with a tiny Jewish
I believed that emigration was a must and quietly pushed him. I should mention that Soviet power greatly helped me in this – the situation in the country (and, in addition, at the university) became more and more unbearable. And, furthermore, I had a strong argument – I insisted that we must do it for Natasha. Alik would sigh, become silent ... but in fact he did make some sort of steps. He was offered a permanent position in Poland and, after long discussions, we decided that this could be an intermediary variant – to depart for a prolonged period of time to the country of the Warsaw Pact and there, depending on the circumstances, go further west or return to the Soviet Union. The question that arose, as usual, concerned his mother, with whom we would have to live if we left the country. I took upon myself the responsibility of getting along with her peacefully, of which Alik was highly skeptical. He asked me not to disturb him and give him the opportunity to peacefully finish working on his book *Introduction to Superanalysis* which he planned to finish in the spring of 1981... He did not have time...

* * *

Alik could easily have registered himself as a Russian. When, in his sixteenth year, he came to fill out the paperwork to receive his passport, he was summoned by the head of the department in the militia (police) and asked:

“Your father was Russian, so why do you write in your application that you choose a Jewish nationality?”

“I was brought up by a Jewish mother.”

“But do you understand that by choosing to be a Jew you just ask for more complications in your life? And you have the legal right to avoid all this!” The representative of the powers-that-be would not relent. (It was neither out of the kindness of his heart nor because of his particular disposition towards Alik that he engendered this discussion – at that time, this was the state policy – to limit the official numbers of Jews in the USSR by all means possible.)

“Jews live somehow in this country, and so will I,” Alik answered.
... All of his life he paid for this decision, and he never regretted his choice...
... If someone would ask me to list the key traits of his character, I would have said nobility and manliness...

* * *

Once I asked Alik:
“Do you forgive Valera Nikolsky’s drunkenness for his kindness?”
I was shocked by his response. “Valera drinks to forget, because he is up to his neck in the dissident movement.”
“What does ‘up to his neck’ mean? You have always participated in this movement.”
“I? No, never,” Alik expressed himself in an unusually lively manner. “I only once signed a letter in defense of my friend and colleague (he meant the letter in defense of Esenin-Volpin).”
“And why? You hate the current regime.”
“Because I do not find a positive message amongst the dissidents. All the fighters for the citizens’ happiness brought those same citizens only sorrow and rivers of blood. There is no major difference between Pugachev and Ulianov (Lenin) – all of them are criminals.”
“And what about the Decembrists?”
“Well, these are saintly idealists. They were lucky, since the uprising was extinguished at its root, and they had no time to ruin anything.”
“So this means that with their innocence they were obliged to the tsar?”
“Yes. If Nicolas I was not firm, the Decembrists would not have been sainted.”

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36 Alexander Esenin-Volpin was a prominent Soviet mathematician, a notable dissident, political prisoner and poet. A pioneer of the human rights movement in the USSR, Esenin-Volpin spent fourteen years in prisons and exile. –Editor’s note
37 Emelian Pugachev (1742-75), a Russian peasant leader, head of the peasant and Cossack rebellion against Catherine II of 1773-74.
38 The (failed) Decembrist revolt was attempted in Imperial Russia by army officers who led about 3000 Russian soldiers on December 14, 1825. The officers were particularly incensed that Alexander I had granted Poland a constitution while Russia remained an absolute monarchy.
“In other words, there are no exceptions – ‘Russian rebellion is senseless and merciless’ always?”

“Yes, and Pushkin understood this beautifully. It was not only because of kindhearted friendship that Pushchin visited him in Mikhailovskoye. He went there at the request of the Secret Society, so as to report the preparation for the uprising, but Pushkin refused to participate in it. And Nicolas I knew about this, and, for this reason, he got closer and kinder to him. It is known that during the investigation of the Decembrist revolt, he called on Pushkin, to see him, and they had a long dialogue. We do not know what Pushkin told the tsar, how he imagined the creation of a decent way of living for the people – and for all of us this is a big loss.”

“Well, you are smart – you invent a positive program.”

“I have thought about it for a long time, but nothing comes out of it. In any given situation, the people always suffer.”

“And, if you could propose a positive program, would you go into politics?”

“Absolutely. Without any hesitation.”

“So this means that you run off into mathematics as into drunkenness?”

A bit hesitant, Alik answered, “To some degree – yes.”

* * *

The night counted out the hours of its reign at the warehouse yard. Palamodych and I sat there quietly near the coffin.

“Do you know,” I broke the silence, “All of this is not an accident that we just did not fly out of here. Just think, we were taken off the plane three times! And also in Domodedovo, they tried to stop me from going. It is simply that Alik does not want to leave from here. What is he to do there, in that stuffy Moscow from where he always attempted to escape, where he was not appreciated, and which bothered him in various ways of life and work. He is a scientist
of world renown, someone who taught numerous graduate students and PhD’s, someone who created his own school, discovering a new direction in science, formally was not even a professor, and so left life as a senior scientific fellow! And here now, the university, bereaved by his death, has sent you and allocated money. Should I be thankful for this?! I just want to send them all to hell! And I warn you that I will not permit any officials at the funeral – I will simply put them out. You’d better warn them so that they do not dare to come. Alik lived amidst them as if in prison and, based on the irony of fate, here, in the land of the gulag, he felt free. Can you imagine,” I continued, “how wonderful it would be to bury him here, on the high bank of the sea, erect a little pyramid, the type that are placed on the tombs of the unknown soldiers, because he, in reality, fought all his life – quietly, without a show, but no less selflessly and courageously. At the top of the pyramid, I would place not a five-cornered star, not a cross, and not a Star of David, but something like a light bulb; and even the pyramid itself should be covered with phosphorous paint so that it would glow like a lighthouse, to be seen by the ships going to Magadan...”

“And will you do this? Will you have the nerve?” asked Palamodych.

“No, I will not have the nerve,” I honestly confessed. “I will not be able to withstand the pressure of public opinion, my gut is too thin. And to excuse my own weakness, I have another reason – I have to bring Alik to his mother so that she can say farewell to her son...”

And we once again fell into long silence...

And the rain continued to drizzle – it was humid and stuffy. It seemed that every drop, like a small hammer, pierced the air to the ground. And together with the thickening air, the stench of rot continued to grow. The apples decayed with amazing rapidity. And we, at this Aeroflot warehouse, were participants in the Divine Comedy, that same part when “everything” turns into “nothingness”... From that time, I know the smell of death – death smells of rotting apples... The sweet smell brought on a high, everything in my mind became confused. Perhaps such a sensation is experienced by hookah
smokers... I stood up from the wooden pavement on which we sat, saying, “I’m going to walk around a bit.”

Between the warehouse and the actual runway was an area overgrown with some sort of low-growing vegetation. I went along this “neutral lane,” tripped, and fell. It did not hurt, but it was very demoralizing. And it was then that I broke down. I began to cry aloud. I rolled around on the ground, shook in hysterics, cried, and wailed. Then I passed out. I do not know for how long this continued. On regaining consciousness, I realized that I lay on my stomach, with my face buried in the ground. My nose was tickled by some unknown smell. It was a tart, sharp, invigorating, and fresh smell – I wanted to breathe it in endlessly. All around was pitch darkness, but, for some reason, I knew that this smell was like a green chlorophyll. So here it was, that fragrance of the taiga for which those young tourists came! Alik also ran off for the same smell! For me, it became the scent of life – I greedily breathed it into myself. And, as if on a screen of a supermodern medical machine, I saw how it cleansed my mind, how the blanket which covered it faded away. Now the brain was fully awakened, pulsing from the circulation of fresh blood, as I continued to breathe in this enlivening smell, and I did not wish to stop. I stored some for the future, for the rest of my life...

Finally, I arose, ripped open my chemise, and wiped off my face, on which there was a mix of tears, snot, and saliva, somehow automatically noting that I can wipe myself off so nicely because the shirt was made out of pure cotton and that Alik was right once again when he taught me not to wear synthetic fabric – what would I do now wearing a nylon lacey chemise?! – and I walked towards the warehouse.

“Where were you for so long?” Palamodych sounded worried.

“I was learning how to live further,” I answered and then said, “You and I are wasting our time, since when the workshops open, while they work on making the coffin smaller, we will be late for the morning flight and lose another day.”

“So what should we do? I could have fixed everything myself, since I can do anything with my own hands, and it is for this reason that the university sent me here; but, in these unforeseen circum-
stances, I don’t have any tools to work with.”

“What this means then is that we need to get them.”

I went off to the night watchmen. They said that they did not have any tools, but perhaps the firemen could help me. Their station was located some 300 meters from the warehouse. I went there. I had to knock for a long time – the firemen “slept like firemen,” but finally, having awoken and heard my request, they immediately gave me various hammers, a sledgehammer, chisels, and God knows what else. They sincerely regretted that they could not help me themselves because, during the time of their shift, they had no right to take even one step outside of their station. With all these tools, I returned to the canopy area, and we began to work. Palamodych began to pound on the zinc coffin with a sledgehammer, so as to diminish its volume by reducing the space between it and the wooden coffin. Under the blows, the zinc sheets bent through, and the nails that held them together began to give way, which compromised the integrity of the coffin. It became necessary to “sew back” the zinc sheets. Neither we nor the firemen had anticipated that, aside from the tools, we would also need nails. We did not wish to disturb them again, so I began to straighten out the nails as best I could on the rock that was located inside the yard. Palamodych, indeed, turned out to be a master handyman as he was able to fasten together the coffin by closing the cracks with these bent nails. Towards morning, the palms of his hand were all calloused, but the coffin corresponded with the standards for transport. There was nothing left to keep us from leaving Magadan. We departed with the morning flight.

The End and Beginning

Three to four young mathematicians awaited us in Domodedovo to accompany the hearse. Perhaps I should have known them but, at that moment, I did not recognize anybody. Alik was taken to the morgue at the Sklifosofsky Institute.

It was July of 1980. Moscow was preparing for the Olympic Games. All around were militia posts, and Muscovites were advised to leave the city if they could; entrance into the capital was strictly limited, and there were very few cars on the deserted streets since
the traffic was restricted. Our vehicle was often stopped and our
documents checked.

... Yes, Alik was an inconvenient person during life, so he re-
mained inconvenient in death...

Much later I found out that a special “Berezin Funeral Com-
mittee” had been organized, and, in hindsight, I understand the love,
care, and attention that was expressed towards him. All those whom
I did not notice and did not thank – I bow down low with grati-
tude... The following day was the funeral. Much time had passed
since Alik’s death, and the farewell could be done only in front of
a closed casket. But E.A. said that she wanted to see her son and
requested that the coffin be opened up for her. She and I came into
the morgue. Blue-lily spots were already forming on Alik’s face. E.A.
came up to the coffin and began to stroke this changed face. The
skin under her fingers began to peel off. She moved her hand to other
places, and there again pieces of the face began to fall off.

“God, isn’t she afraid?” whispered the worker of the morgue who
stood near me.

“She is not afraid,” I answered in the same whisper. “She is a
pathologist-anatomist.”

Then the coffin was closed and the farewell began. It was warm,
sincere, and inexpressibly bitter. Only people very close to me and
Alik were present. First to speak was Volodya Tikhomirov, and he
said all which I, as a friend of the family but not a mathematician,
could not say – that Alik was on the rise, ready for takeoff, that
his years had given him wisdom which did not blunt his creative
potential, that, among his contemporaries, he had retained his youth
better than others and remained youthful in his work, and that the
scientific community had only begun to know the total worth of his
work, and that he was on the threshold of fame... Then spoke Nikita
Vvedenskaya, Victor Palamodov, and someone else, but, diving into
my own thoughts, I did not hear anybody else...

...Did not live long enough, did not love long enough, did not see
his daughter grow up, did not have time to do everything which he
was capable of, did not wait to receive the recognition he deserved...
And then it was necessary to continue my life. I moved to Vinnitskaya Street since it was impossible to leave E.A. alone. We did not get along during Alik's life, and now we had to live together when he was no longer there.

We attempted to bring order to his papers, to figure out the manuscripts. Friends, mathematicians, and Alik's students came over, and the question of publishing his unfinished works was brought up.

... Soon after Alik’s death, thanks to the concern and effort of Kirillov, Palamodov, Shubin, Schwarz, Ogievetsky, Fradkin, and Leites, these were published: Introduction to Superanalysis, Introduction to Algebra and Analysis with Anticommuting Variables, Shrödinger Equation...

Having established what needed to be done in Alik's memory, the mathematicians left to finish their summer vacation.

And E.A. and I remained together.

I did not wish to see anybody; the television static irritated me; and we didn’t even turn on the radio. We laid out Alik’s still unclaimed papers, as best we could, and then cleaned the apartment. It became light and empty. I had the impression that even dust did not accumulate. It seemed to me that we lived inside a glass prism with thick transparent walls which did not let in any images of earthly life. But they were unnecessary anyway. It was as if we had relocated to Purgatory, but did not notice the shift into another world...

In her “previous” life, E.A. had spent most of her time reading. But now she could not read – she was unable to concentrate on anything except for her sorrow. I understood that she could not be left alone with her own thoughts, so I offered to read aloud. E.A. loved Chekhov. His reserve, intellectualism, hidden humor, and the deep layers of contradictory feelings behind banal words were close to her heart. We ended up on Chekhov’s short stories. E.A. especially loved “Ionych” – we read it several times. And we both felt that Mandelshtam resonated with our mood:

Osip Mandelshtam (1891 – 1938), one of the most cherished poets of the Russian intelligentsia. He wrote verses distinguished by classical restraint, majestic conciseness, and sonority. His late poetry draw a gloomy picture of the Soviet reality of the 1930s. Arrested in 1934, he was exiled first to the Urals and then to Voronezh. In 1938 he
What to do with the wounded bird?
Solid, restrained, the silence:
the bells, out of the misted
bell-tower, have been stolen.

And the heights stand,
like a white empty turret,
mute and orphaned,
of mistiness and quiet.

And then we would go to the kitchen to drink evening tea, loaded up with tranquilizers prescribed for us both, before going off to our rooms. At that time, I did not know that totally different medicine should have been given to E.A.

... Soviet psychiatry was marred by its dealings with dissidents, who were put into psychiatric wards if, for various reasons, it seemed impossible to send them to prison. In addition to that, there was a less noticeable, but quite harmful, influence of official state policy on this branch of medicine. In agreement with official morality, the “builder of communism,” by definition, could not be anything but an optimist, and the concept of clinical depression was practically wiped out from medical vocabulary. Only in France did I find out that depression amongst the elderly leads to senility and memory loss. E.A. needed to be treated not with tranquilizers but with antidepressants...

At the end of the summer, I went to Riga for several days to bring back Natasha. During my absence, E.A. left the house and was unable to find her way home. She forgot her address and last name, and remembered only that she had a son named Alik and requested that he be called. On my return to Moscow, I managed to find her in the Kashchenko Hospital.42

... E.A. often recited: “God protect me from going mad, I’d rather go a-begging on the tramp.”

was rearrested, sent to a gulag camp, and died in harrowing circumstances in Vladivostok.
The following verse is from Mandelshtam’s first book, Kamen (1911), translated by A. S. Kline. –Editor’s note
42The largest psychiatric hospital in Moscow. –Editor’s note
Her prayer was not heard... She outlived Alik by three and a half years...

As we know, unusual encounters occur in life. I was destined to find out that no less strange coincidences occur in death. Some two weeks after Alik’s death, Sveta called me and said:

“Why are you sitting around there like a nobody? You cannot go on that way. Life continues.”

“Well, and how does life continue?”

“Yes, here, now Vysotsky died,” said Sveta as she herself became uneasy by her own voicing of this absurdity... Uncontrolled laughter came over me. And this news, as a counter-shock, brought me back to real life.

Several months later, in connection with formalities concerning the publication of Introduction to Superanalysis, I had to get a written statement of Alik’s will.

... At that time, it was considered that a Soviet citizen could not have any private (at that time they said “personal”) property. For this reason, the only office which handled issues connected to the inheritance of citizens in Moscow and in the Moscow oblast’ (region) was Notary Office Number 1, or, more specifically, one of its four branches. The office was located on Kirov Street in a building erected in the early twentieth century. The inheritance branch occupied the top floor, the fourth. Considering that the ceilings in this building were some five meters high, and there was no elevator, the “ascent” was equivalent to at least seven floors in an ordinary building. To climb up there was a hardship in itself. But this was a lesser one. It turned out that this floor, in contrast to the rest of them below, was crammed with people. In the capital and its surrounding region, there were still enough people who had some sort of possessions or intellectual property that their inheritors could fill up a spacious

43Vladimir Vysotsky (1938 – 1980) was a great Russian bard – song-writer, poet, and actor, whose work had an immense impact on Russian culture in the 1960s and 70s. He continued and developed the tradition of Bulat Okudzhava and was cherished in intelligentsia and youth. His songs were perceived as a breath of fresh air in the stinky atmosphere in which Soviet people were forced to exist. His work was largely suppressed by the official Soviet establishment. –Editor’s note
corridor of the old building to the point that there was no room even for an apple to drop...

My visits to the notary followed one and the same routine. After work, as a rule overburdened with heavy bags of groceries, I would drag myself to this fourth floor, practically the seventh, and would sign up for an appointment. Thereafter, on the appointed date, I would take a day off and would spend hours waiting in line; afterwards, the notary, in just two minutes, under idiotic pretexts, would kick me away like a football.

In the end, I staged a scene. At the height of our conflict, the notary grabbed me by the shoulder and ordered me to go with her somewhere into the depths of the corridor, to a door with the label “Employees Only.” We entered a room which was approximately sixteen square meters. Two-thirds of it, from the floor to the ceiling, was occupied by a mound of files dumped into a heap, each containing an individual’s inheritance documents. The furniture in the room consisted of a single Vienna chair with a broken back.

“Here” – the guardian of the law told me – “amidst these files is yours. We don’t have an archivist. If you wish, find it for yourself.”

She left, and I began to sort through and pick over the files. In this way, I spent four hours bending down and standing up. Suddenly a file slipped down from the mound, and I almost stepped on it! On the file there was a label: “Vladimir Semenovich Vysotsky.” Carefully I picked it up and placed it on the Vienna chair. Finally, I found Alik’s file. Then I sat down on this half-broken chair, placed both of the files on my knees, and began to quietly rock just as one does when lulling a baby to sleep. I sat there and thought of both of them, two such different people. One was a poet-singer cherished by the people of a huge country, while the other was a scientist known throughout the world – both half-blood Jews, they were loyal to their homeland, Russia, until their last breath, suffering their misfortunes together with her, and living their short lives under the weight of a state power which treated them like a stepmother treats her unwanted stepsons...

44 Approximately 160 square feet. –Editor’s note
... And all around lay other files, with other fates, and before me lay a materialized postulate: “everyone is equal in death” ...

Later, I stood up, left Volodya Vysotsky on the chair, and went to fill out the inheritance paperwork...

And there was one more “virtual” encounter with Vysotsky, when I buried the urn.

According to family tradition, Alik was cremated. We had a gravesite at the Vostriakovskoe Cemetery. But it seemed to me that it would be more fitting if Alik were laid to rest alone, away from everybody, something that he deserved at least after death. Officially new burials were prohibited at the Vostriakovskoe Cemetery, but the university helped once more. It was once again Palamodych who helped me – he brought me the appropriate paperwork, typed on official stationary, with the seal and signature of the Rector. After the inevitable hassle and runaround between the administration of the cemetery and Moscow City Hall, permission was granted.

I picked out a place for the grave at the intersection of two paths of secondary importance. It appeared to me that it best suited Alik – alone but not lonely, since people walk there from time to time. One can hear their voices, so he could continue to participate in life.

I did not wish to erect a metal fencing along the perimeter of the site. Alik was behind a grate all his life, so let him lie free in his death. And the grave itself appeared to me like a replica of Russian nature, which Alik loved tenderly, amidst which he strolled... The entire area of the lot was made into a high mound which was covered with green undergrowth. A birch and a willow that had just begun to sprout were kept intact. For the tombstone I wished to lay a simple, unworked boulder, like those encountered in the central regions of the Russian plain, but it turned out that it was extremely difficult to get one. Someone said that for Vladimir Vysotsky’s grave, geologists brought a meteorite from the taiga on their own backs. Marina Vladi,45 Vysotsky’s wife, wanted to have it placed on his grave, but the poet’s parents preferred something mindless, with a guitar and horses standing on their hind legs. “Ask Marina to give you the

45 A well-known French actress. –Editor’s note
meteorite,” my friends suggested. At first I became intrigued, but later thought: “This meteorite is soaked through with the geologists’ love for Vysotsky. Alik deserves his own personal stone, despite the fact that it may not be a visitor from the sky.”

In the end I came to an agreement with the workers of the cemetery, who found the type of boulder I was searching for. They placed it at the right side of the mound, at an angle away from the trees. In such a state, the grave stood more than ten years, but the earthen mound had to be mended many times, as it settled. The green grass required constant attention. It became apparent that without continuous care, the grave would be quickly ruined. But I am not eternal, and as for Natasha, well, she is far away, living in another country.

Having thought about it, I decided to cover the mound with marble. The all-knowing workers of the cemetery said that the grave of an adult person should be covered with black marble. But Alik had the light soul of a child, and I preferred white marble. So it turned out to be a light plinth, some half meter high, with skewed asymmetric sides but in harmony with the surrounding landscape. The plinth seems to rise up out of the ground naturally. The boulder was situated in its previous place, to the right of the plinth. Its entire surface was laid out in two lines, made of the same white marble, but broken up into small, irregularly-sized pieces – as if it was an abstract image of two prostrate birches on the grave of Berezin.

To the left side of the white plinth, as if breaking out of the ground and piercing through the marble facing, rising high into the sky, are two living, straight trees. At their base, there is the following epitaph:

BEREZIN
Felix Aleksandrovich
Mathematician
1931–1980

Well, this is it... the earthly journey of Alik has ended...

* * *

Once in the cemetery a few women passed by me. One of them,
turning to her companions, said, “Now we are going to Berezin…”

Unwittingly I squeezed into their conversation, “I’m also going to see Berezin. Were you somehow related?”

Embarrassed, the woman answered, “No, we don’t know him, this is just our reference point…”

And I thought, “This is Alik’s destiny – to give people direction.”

Coming to his graveside I do not wish him to rest in peace; I try to soothe him, telling him, “Now you have more followers! Recognition has come to you! People understand and appreciate you!”

La Rochelle
July 2005
Glimpses of Felix Berezin’s Life