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Vassily Nalimov...As I Remember Him

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The author and Professor Nalimov in his study at home in Moscow, 1992

IT IS not an easy task to write memoirs about outstanding people. Being a subjective genre by definition, memoirs involuntarily bring to light the personality of their authors, which, though never an intentional goal, is nevertheless almost inevitable. This is why I will try to describe only my own impressions, without any pretension to embrace something more significant. I am sure that more significant things can be (and perhaps have already been) described by others who are more knowledgeable and are in a better position to do so than myself.

I first came to the Laboratory of Statistical Methods at Moscow State University at the end of August, 1970. Vassily Vassilievich Nalimov was then looking for a secretary and eventually a translator of his works. After a short interview, he took me to visit the Laboratory, highlighting especially the newly organized library which was justifiably an object of pride. I was very timid and did not know exactly how I should behave in front of a university professor (I graduated from the University only two years earlier), the more so because V.V.'s conduct was very ceremonious. For example, when he opened the door to let me pass in front of him, he stepped aside and bent his head, almost making a bow with the sumptuous gesture of a XIXth century gentleman. In general, during all the years that I spent at V.V.'s side, he invariably struck me by his smart appearance, agility of movements, and elegance in clothing.

I worked for V.V. for 20 years as his secretary and the translator of all his works into English. My initial timidity dissolved rather quickly and was replaced even by a sort of unceremoniousness, of which I now feel ashamed. (I hope though that it never surpassed certain limits.) During all this time, I certainly communicated with V.V. in a most ordinary situation of secretarial work, full of infinite trivia, which can screen one from the real scale of the personality with whom one is dealing. To enlarge my awareness, I had to experience V.V. in a new context: for example, once at the Institute of the History of Natural Sciences and Technology where he was awarded a medal, V.V. made a wonderful little speech in which for nearly 10 minutes he spoke about almost all the ideas that were important to him, such as historical continuity and the significance and spontaneity of spiritual experience—and all this was presented in a brilliant, witty, and at the same time, very serious manner.

V.V. himself was very far from any unceremoniousness, which was due both to his character and to his “outdated” upbringing. At the same time, he hated to emphasize any hierarchy, his own professorship, and the status of a “boss.” He was always surprised, even vexed, by the fact that people knocked upon the door of his office before entering.

His communication with other people was a sort of paradox. On the one hand, he almost never shared his personal feelings with others. On the other hand, when he was preoccupied with an idea, he was ready to share the results of his speculations literally with the first person to appear. For example, he would discuss the views of Sir Karl Popper or the application of the Bayesian probability formula with the manager who came by to have a paper signed or a young courier who brought a letter. And he always spoke to such visitors as if they, too, were all this time busy thinking over the same problems and were absolutely ready to perceive his point of view with the same interest and alacrity. But it is probably inaccurate to call this situation a paradox: V.V. seemed to belong to the rarest breed of people whose inner life consists predominantly of mental work, of speculations over the most profound and essential ideas which were of compelling interest largely for himself. This became all the more evident by the end of his life, when he practically “switched off” during trivial conversations on everyday topics, but the moment he was asked about his plans, he immediately “switched on” and would speak up on what he was thinking about for at least half an hour on end. What really struck his interlocutors was this sole and true interest in things far from everyday problems; it was obvious that this consuming interest was at the core of his personality and very likely prolonged his physical life.

It goes without saying that it was a real pleasure to work for V.V. I do not remember a single time when he would speak as a “boss” or utter an order of any sort. Every time that I asked when I should finish a translation, he would answer, “When you finish it.” Such an attitude certainly stimulated me to do the work rapidly and well. I always set the tempo myself, but

worked even in the maternity home, quite diligently translating my usual number of pages in the pre-maternity ward. I do not think, however, V.V. would really consider such an attitude as outstanding: a constant state of work was so natural for him that he would rather have been surprised by a different attitude. Of course, sometimes he set forth for me a really difficult task: for example, to make an interlinear English translation of Tsvetaeva, or even worse, a poem by Khlebnikov based on morphological features of the Russian language which are nonexistent in English. But if I started to groan, V.V. would always happily reply, “Alla, but aren’t you interested?” As I see now, my personal luck was that the circle of interests of V.V. was extremely large and diversified, and markedly different from what was then considered as appropriate for a “gentleman” set of the Soviet intellectual of the ’70s. For example, it was hardly conceivable at that time that someone might not know who Bosch was—simply because it was “à la mode.” So I was astonished when V.V. told me about a remarkable painter he had discovered in the course of one of his visits abroad; he would pronounce his name in the German way, like “Bosh,” so it took me some time to understand he really meant Bosch. (Mind you that V.V. discovered him not because it was “à la mode” but quite independently, in the immense information flow he pursued.) Since I had to translate the works of V.V. into English, the professional approach to numerous quotations abundant in his texts would certainly not be to translate them anew but to find them in already existing translations. Due to this, I found many wonderful books in the Lenin Library—to find some of them I had to go to the Museum of Books or to apply for a pass to a special department closed to common readers, more often than not for various political reasons. I remember thus seeing a luxurious edition of the *Divine Comedy* by Dante illustrated by Salvador Dali. During that epoch, every such experience was like crossing the boundaries of everyday existence.

As to personal souvenirs, as far as I remember, they started to appear in our conversations only several years later. I could never understand why V.V. talked so little about the personal circumstances of his life (luckily, by now they have been published in his book *The Rope-Dancer*)—was it because he was a reticent person who could not open up for other people, or because he was just unlike any other person and his real personal life history was preponderantly that of intense intellectual efforts? The times were changing and he was able now to let out his memories without being persecuted or putting other people in danger. The episodes that he then started to remember (or rather started to talk about)—that disturbed him so that he could hardly restrain tears—would mostly deal with certain crucial turns in his life that more or less predetermined his destiny. I have the impression that V.V. was especially sensitive to this “constituent” (to use a term of his own) and regarded his life as a service to the obligation pledged to in his youth, as a justification of his initiation into the modern Knights Templar.





Making Ready for Discussion
Mikhail Zlatkovsky