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An American's vignette of Petr L. Kapitsa

Robert T. Beyer

Brown University, Department of Physics, Providence, RI 02912, USA

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In January 1955, I took on the position of editor of the English translation of ZhETF (JETP), which was to begin with vol. 28 (July–Dec., 1954). This was done under the sponsorship of the American Institute of Physics (AIP), and with support from the National Science Foundation. At that time, the editor of ZhETF was Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences A. A. Andreev, an elderly, eminent acoustician, whom I was later to meet both in Moscow and in Providence (my field of research has been acoustics). There was at that time no copyright agreement between the USSR and the USA, but it was thought polite for me to write Prof. Andreev to tell him of our undertaking.

I wrote such a letter, and in due time an answer arrived from Moscow. This informed me that Andreev was no longer the editor of ZhETF. The new editor was P. L. Kapitsa, and I would be hearing from him.

After a few weeks, I received a letter from Academician Kapitsa. It was a most cordial note, expressing his warm interest in and support for our project. I remember his suggesting that it would be nice if we followed the congenial practice of giving the author some reprints of his work. As a result of this request, and since reprints as such did not exist, several copies of each translated issue were sent to him for cutting up and sending to the appropriate authors.

During the next few years, I exchanged several letters with Academician Kapitsa. I remember, in particular, one in which he informed me that the solid state portions of ZhETF were going to be split off into a new journal, so that AIP might be interested in translating that journal. (It was so split off, and the AIP's translation journal SOLID STATE PHYSICS is now in its 36th year.) That letter actually saved the journal for the AIP. At about the same time, we had learned that the late Robert Maxwell (Pergamon Press) was planning to translate it, but he withdrew after AIP used the correspondence with Kapitsa to demonstrate its prior right.

When I received my first letter from Kapitsa, colleagues told me I should preserve it, for it was perhaps the first such letter received from him in the West after his long period of house-confinement. This remark was recalled to my mind by reading the paper in LTP by N. E. Alekseevskii («He Was Not Afraid Of Hardships»)* which concludes with the terse line «Finally, Petr Leonidovich returned to his institute in 1955 and life resumed its normal course».

Some years back, I sent all this correspondence to the Niels Bohr Library of History of Physics of the American Institute in Physics in New York since the material seemed an appropriate part of the history of physics in our time.

In 1958 I had an opportunity to attend the Sixth All-Union Conference on Acoustics in Moscow. I wrote to Academician Kapitsa, telling him that I would like to have an opportunity of meeting him during the time of that meeting.

I heard nothing from him prior to the conference, but just before one of the sessions, I was approached by B. G. Spakovskii, whose name I recognized. (He had done significant early work on the dispersion of sound in organic liquids in the 1930's.) Spakovskii told me that he had been sent by Kapitsa to arrange our meeting. And so, on a following day, Spakovskii and I rode out to the Institute for Physical Problems. It was an exciting day for me, since I met not only Kapitsa that day, but also L. D. Landau, E. M. Lifshits and I. M. Khalatnikov — a tremendous collection of stars for one young and very unimportant physicist to associate with!.

In recalling that meeting, I cannot but be impressed with the cordiality of my host and with the amount of

* N. E. Alekseevskii, *Fiz. Nizk. Temp.* 20, 690 (1994); [*Low Temp. Phys.* 20, 543 (1994)].

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time he spent with me. He took me on a walking tour of the Institute, and led me into the offices of ZhETF, where he introduced me as his colleague and the «manager of the New York office of ZhETF».

From reading the articles in the July issue of Low Temperature Physics*, I am reminded of Kapitsa's readiness with incisive remarks and quips. On taking me through the store of electronic equipment at IPP, he noted that they had tried to buy such equipment from America but «your John Foster Dulles (the American Secretary of State at the time) wouldn't let us. We had to make our own. Now we don't need your equipment. We are better than you are. What do you have that's better than Sputnik?»

Sputnik I had orbited barely six months before, and I was very hard pressed for a rejoinder. Those were the days of the cold war and of the so-called 'kitchen debate' of Nixon and Khrushchev. The best that I could say was «Well, we have the Salk vaccine». «Ah», admitted Kapitsa, «in medicine, you are still ahead of us». And so, the honors were perhaps even. But Kapitsa still had his needle out, as we would say, waiting for a chance for another job. As our meeting drew to a close, he asked me if I had been impressed by what I had seen at the Acoustics Institute, which I had visited a day or two before. I answered in the affirmative. Kapitsa then saw his opportunity: «Well, then, if you were impressed by what you saw, think how much more impressed you would have been by what you didn't see». I later published that remark in an article in PHYSICS TODAY, and I was told by the next American visitor to the Acoustics Institute (Leo Beranek) that the institute people spent much of his time assuring him that I had seen everything. But Kapitsa truly had had the last word.

Memories of that visit with Academician Kapitsa have remained strong with me for nearly forty years. As well as being a great physicist, he was one of the great personalities of physics of our time, and even one afternoon spent with him was a treasure to be savored for a lifetime.

* *Fiz. Nizk. Temp.* **20**, № 7 (1994); [*Low Temp. Phys.* **20**, No 7 (1994)].