



Historical paper

Solomon V. Shereshevsky: The great Russian mnemonist

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ABSTRACT

A biographical sketch is given of Solomon V. Shereshevsky, a man gifted with exceptional memory skills who became famous after the publication of Aleksandr R. Luria's book *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, in 1968.

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The book on the mnemonist is the most popular of those written by Aleksandr R. Luria (1902–1977). Russian and English editions appeared in 1968 (Luria, 1968a; 1968b), while translations in almost all European languages and also in Chinese and Japanese were published soon afterwards. The adventures and misadventures of “the man with a great memory” were the subject of the play *Je suis un phénomène d'après Une prodigieuse mémoire* (1998) by the English director Peter Brook, and the film *Il mnemonista* (2000) by the Italian director Paolo Rosa (scientific advice was given by the present author). Also, the film *Away with Words* (1999) by the Australian director Christopher Doyle and more recently the play *The Mnemonist of Dutchess County* (2013), written by Josh Koenigsberg and directed by Laura Savia, were largely inspired by Luria's book. Moreover, one wonders whether the famous short story, *Funes el memorioso* (1942), by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges might be influenced by Luria's account, considering the remarkable analogies in the extraordinary memory of the Uruguayan and Russian heroes. However, as

Borges' story was published many years before Luria's book, this relationship has no basis (Verberne, 1976; Bell-Villada, 1999; Quian Quiroga, 2012). From the other side, as far as we know, there is no evidence of Borges's influence on Luria's work. Indeed, the first news of the prodigious Russian mnemonist in the West came in June 1947 from a brief note that was issued in some newspapers (e.g., Associated Press, 1947a, 1947b). The reader of *The New York Times* on 15 June 1947 might have learnt of what follows:

The mental feats of a Russian who “probably possesses the strongest memory of all men” were reported today from Moscow. The memory master is Solomon Shereshevsky, reported by Moscow Professor Alander [sic] Luria in a Tass dispatch to be able to quote accurately anything he heard 10 or 12 years ago. “Solomon Shereshevsky most probably possesses the strongest memory of all men”, Luria told a Soviet News Agency reporter. “He can easily remember any number of words and digits, equally easily he memorizes whole pages from books on any subject and in any language and for a quite

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long time at that. Shereshevsky can accurately quote anything he was told ten or twelve years ago. To everything he hears or sees he simultaneously reacts with all his senses. Thus to him any sound or thing has its own color, temperature, weight, shape and so on”.

It is worth of noting that the news gave the mnemonist's family name in its entirety, while ten years later in the book Luria chose to use the abbreviation “Sh.”.

Luria's analysis of the exceptional memory characteristics shown by Shereshevsky had two main types of impact on psychology and neuropsychology, as noted by Bruner (1987). First, it stimulated a new interest in different aspects of memory and related cognitive processes among psychologists and neuroscientists. We refer especially to the phenomena of synaesthesia and remembering strategies, and to a lesser extent the relationship between memory, emotions and personality. Second, as was also shown in the subsequent book on the brain-injured patient Lev S. Zasetky (Luria, 1971, 1972), the accurate and thorough examination of a single case drew renewed attention to individual-case clinical research as a necessary complement to the experimental investigation of groups of patients in neuropsychology (Mecacci, 2005).

Despite the popularity gained, the Russian mnemonist remained for decades an individual whose biography was known only by the few details given by Luria in his book. We did not know even the year of his birth and whether he was dead by the time the book was published. No photograph was available. Finally, in 2007 the documentary film *Zagadky pamyati* [Memory mysteries] written by Lyudmila Malkhozova and directed by Dmitry Grachev was produced for the Russian TV Channel 1 (available at: <http://rutube.ru/video/181e4bc4a541950f93babc95f0eb1a3b>). The first part was devoted to Shereshevsky, revealing biographical documents and photographs that had been made available thanks to his family. By putting together the information present in Luria's book and other publications with what was presented in this documentary film, the following profile may be formed.

Solomon Veniaminovich Shereshevsky was born in 1896 in Torzhok, a small town 145 miles north of Moscow, to a Jewish family. His father owned a bookshop, his mother was an educated woman. He had several brothers and sisters, some of whom are said to have been gifted people (but we do not know in what field). Remarkable memory skills seem to have been present also in his father, while his mother could quote long passages from the Torah. Following primary school and after his musical ability had been ascertained, Shereshevsky was enrolled at a music school. He could have become a proficient violinist, if an ear disease and the resultant hearing deficit had not interrupted his training. Then, he found a work as a reporter on a Moscow newspaper. As it is known, the editor was surprised that his reporter, differently from colleagues, did not take any notes about whatever assignments he received in the morning for the rest of the day. The editor suggested to Shereshevsky that he should have psychological testing for this unusual performance. Solomon Veniaminovich and Aleksandr Romanovich (as they surely called each other, according to Russian usage) were two young men when they met the first time in July 1926 at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow: the former was just under thirty, the latter was twenty-four years old. Shereshevsky submitted to many long and different

memory tests for over thirty years. Moreover he regularly reported to Luria his impressions, memories, and thoughts. The greater part of this material was included in Luria's book, but some results, especially those about strategies adopted in problem solving, were only briefly discussed in the book. Fortunately, the file is still fully preserved in Luria's archive that is located at his dacha at Svistucha, a village 50 miles north of Moscow (the place where Luria wrote the most of his works, included the book on the mnemonist) – one may hope that in the future this material will be studied to complete our picture. At the Institute of Psychology, Shereshevsky was tested also by Aleksey N. Leont'yev, who devoted a section of his book on memory to the description of results obtained during a year and a half of investigations (Leont'yev, 1931; reprint 2003, pp. 186–195). Luria and Leont'yev were the main coworkers of Lev S. Vygotsky, the leader of the most promising school of psychology in Russia at that time. Vygotsky also had several opportunities to meet Shereshevsky. While the mnemonist was conversing with Vygotsky, he once remarked to the psychologist: “What a crumbly, yellow voice you have”. The same type of synaesthetic association was made in connection with the film director Sergey M. Eisenstein: “Listening to him, it was”, Shereshevsky noted in 1951, “as though a flame with fibers protruding from it was advancing right toward me. I got so interested in his voice, I couldn't follow what he was saying” (Luria, 1968b, p. 24). In the second half of 1920s Eisenstein, Luria and Vygotsky joined in a project to study cognitive and emotional processes involved in film viewing. In this research



Aleksandr R. Luria in the early 1930s.



Solomon V. Shereshevsky (Figs. 2–4 are frames from the documentary film *Zagadky pamyati* [Memory mysteries] written by Lyudmila Malkhozova and directed by Dmitry Grachev for the Russian TV Channel 1).

context, Eisenstein was especially interested in Shereshevsky's phenomena of synaesthesia (Eisenstein, 1969, p. 148). They were so familiar each other that in 1933 during a lecture on film direction at the Moscow Institute of Cinematography Eisenstein invited Shereshevsky to be present and introduced him as a "friend" (Eisenstein, 2002, pp. 53–56).

In December 1937, Shereshevsky noted: "All the jobs I had were simply work I was doing in the mean time" (Luria, 1968b, p. 158). So he was a reporter, a broker, a vaudeville actor, a herbal therapist, and it seems that in the last period of his life he was a taxi driver too. Probably, he had the most success when he gave evidence of his great memory capacity in public performances. In the above mentioned film *Zagadky pamyati* one can see many bills announcing these shows.

Shereshevsky married and had one son. He died in Moscow in 1958. Luria concluded: "Indeed, one would be hard put to say which was more real for him: the world of imagination in which he lived, or the world of reality in which he was but a



Solomon V. Shereshevsky playing violin (he was left-handed).



A bill announcing Shereshevsky's show: "The master of memorization art – The vaudeville artist – S. V. Shereshevsky – Immediate memorization at audience request of family names, letters, numbers, book texts, verses – word and phrase salads in the languages of all the people of the world".

temporary guest" (1968b, p. 159). Now that we know something more about this man, and we may look at his expressive face, the impression remains that Solomon Veniaminovich's world was surely unique.

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