



Gita Vygotskaya's Greetings to Conference Participants

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

I am very happy to send my greetings to all of you who gathered for this conference in Prague. I am sincerely grateful to you for the interest you show to the life and creative work of my father Lev Vygotsky. Now this name is well known in the world. Several times I have attended conferences where representatives from all the five continents were present. His works have been published in scores of countries, and books have been written about him in many countries. However, I remember well those times – just a few dozens of years ago – when it was not advisable even to mention his name, let alone make references to Vygotsky. It was still impossible to read his works after the official ban on his name was lifted because in those years when his name was banned, a great many of his books were simply destroyed. A new generation of psychologists arrived who didn't know anything about him. My contemporaries and I had more luck. We were fortunate to have a chance to listen to the lectures by his pupils, who notwithstanding all of the bans, would tell us about him and his work. Those few books that I had at home, I would surreptitiously bring to my fellow students to read – I did it in secret as if they were illegal. Now – thank heaven! – everything has changed. I am not going to talk about Vygotsky's creative work – you are going to discuss it during the conference. I would like to share with you some of my memories which you cannot hear from anyone else but me. I am going to tell you how Vygotsky worked in child psychology.

He worked in different areas of psychology, but I will tell you about what I experienced myself. As a child I always was the subject of Vygotsky's experiments. He tested and perfected various methods on me

and my brother; we were his first guinea pigs. I remember well when Vygotsky started using Sakharov's methodology. In the 1930s, when he became interested in Wolfgang Köhler's experiments, Vygotsky repeated the experiments which Köhler had conducted with apes, but with us – his children. He would create on the floor something like a labyrinth with a tangerine in the center. Nearby he would put a stick and using it, we had to lead the tangerine through the labyrinth. If we succeeded, we would get the tangerine and Vygotsky was as happy as we were. The motivation was quite substantial for us because we didn't get a chance to eat tangerines often.

Even when he was not conducting any experiments, he would keep recording his observations, asking us endless questions and creating special problem situations which he would record and analyze afterwards. I even remember once when my younger sister, not being able to stand another round of his questions, exploded, "Why do you always ask such silly questions? Mother never asks anything – she knows everything herself."

I remember once it was raining for days and we had to stay indoors. After the rain stopped, even though it was late in the evening and was already getting dark, they took us out for a walk. Since everything was flooded, we walked along the streets and suddenly found ourselves on the embankment of the Moscow River. For one reason or another, the river at that moment made great impression upon me. It was all whirling between the stone walls of the embankments, and the bridge over it seemed so solid and eternal. I was astounded by my discovery. I could not wait to get home. Without even taking off my coat in the hall, I rushed into the room where the grown-ups were having tea. I ran to Vygotsky and said, "Daddy! I know where the rivers come from!" Taking off my coat he asked, "So where from?" And I explained with great solemnity, "They dig them out near the bridges!" My father was greatly amused by my discovery and he was laughing heartily, but it never made me feel offended. After I grew up, I found a description of this incident in one of his papers 'Learning and Development in Preschool Children'. It was introduced with the following words, "One girl I know told me ..." I knew this girl very well.

The fact that I had to be a guinea pig is even commemorated in a film. In 1928 Nikolai A. Bernshtein was shooting a film which included an experiment by Vygotsky. In the film you could see that after the experiment was over, Vygotsky was apparently quite happy with the results because he tenderly pattered me on the cheek.

There was another incident, which shows that though Vygotsky valued greatly his children and the relations with them. He would forget about everything when he was involved in his scientific work.

It was the first school day in my life. Daddy took me to school. We all still lived at the dacha in the countryside and had not yet moved back into town. He talked to the teacher and found out when we would be free. He told me, “You will be free around 12. I will come here to take you home – you probably will have to wait for me for about 15 minutes. Please don’t go anywhere and wait for me right here in the courtyard!”

The classes were over, and all the children came out of the school running into the courtyard. All of them, except me, had studied together in the preparatory ‘0’ class the previous year, so they were happy to see each other again. They talked for a while and then went home. I was left alone in a huge courtyard! The pupils of the second shift started gathering in the courtyard. The bell rang, and they went into the school building. I was left alone again. Lots of time passed- several hours. I started getting really miserable. I saw a demonstration go by and then people returning from the Red Square go into another direction. I was there all alone, and I felt very sorry for myself and started crying quietly. A nice, kind woman came up to me and said, “What are you doing here, little girl?” I told her, “I am waiting for my daddy.” “Is he supposed to pick you up here?” “Yes,” I replied. “So would you like me to take you to your apartment?” I explained to her that I could not go home. The apartment was locked and everybody was in the countryside except my father, who was supposed to pick me up. At this point some other people approached. They started giving their opinions. I became very upset, and I burst out crying and kept crying. Then one of them said, “You should be ashamed of yourself. You are such a big girl, and you don’t know your address yet.” Through the tears I explained that I did know the address, but I could not go there because the apartment was locked. Then one of the women said, “You know what? Let’s go to my place. I will feed you, you will have a little rest, and then we will think how to find your dad.” However, I refused to leave because deep in my heart I believed that he would remember about me. At long last – it was about 4 pm – one of the women noticed a man approaching from the side street and asked me, “Look! Isn’t that your father running in the street over there?” I saw my dad running and even without thanking this nice kind woman, I rushed towards him. I wanted to get him away from these angry parents – I was afraid that they would lynch him – they were so angry at his behavior. It turned out that

after his lecture the students started asking questions, and he completely lost his sense of the time. Alas, this happened to him often enough. When we returned to the country house, I never said a word about what I had experienced during the day; but it was Daddy himself who, feeling terribly guilty, told everyone about what had happened. That was the beginning of my school life!

I would like to wish you a successful conference; I hope that all the participants will have interesting meetings and make interesting discoveries!