

Intellectual, researcher, linguist

Aaron B. Dolgopolsky related his life story to his family. His wife, Tsippi Fleischer, is a famous Israeli musician and composer; their son Jacob is a historian and biblical scholar. Tsippi recorded on tape Aaron's unhurried narration for almost six months – from November 19, 1999 till April 26, 2000. The resulting six-hour monologue included recollections of his childhood, his political thinking, and the story of his passion for languages. On 18th November, Aaron will celebrate his 80th anniversary.

(Translated from Hebrew by Tsippi Fleischer and Irina Ovchinnikova)

Childhood, Adolescence, Youth

When the time came for my mother to give birth, my father rushed to look for a car to take her to a hospital. He could find no car, though, so I was born at home, two months ahead of time.

Luckily, several hours later, my mom and I got to a hospital, where I was immediately placed into an incubator: otherwise, I would hardly have survived.

I was far from being an exemplary, obedient child. I argued with my parents and grandmother about our view of the world. I realized that God did not exist. It was so simple: if he was in heaven, why was he invisible, why did he not fall, where was he sitting there? Moreover, how could he sit there, on a cloud? No one could sit on a cloud! That is how I argued.

My family lived in an anti-Semitic environment. Even the children who played in the yard next to our house were anti-Semites. I did not play with them; actually, I had no contact with them at all. Instead, I stayed at home and read books. The local children's library was situated not far from us, so I borrowed books from it and read. I had read almost all the books in that library.

My parents were supposed to send me to school when I turned eight; but the school in our neighborhood was horrible, so my parents kept me at home. I did not attend classes. Besides, I already knew how to read and write, so I would have been bored at school, and indeed the atmosphere there was quite dreadful. I cannot recall now the exact reason for my staying at home. How did my parents manage to keep me out of school? Of course, there were some attempts to force me to attend classes, but none of them succeeded. Despite of the fact than I rarely visited the classroom, the very thought of school made me unhappy. Eventually, I was transferred to another school.

Meanwhile, the time came for my primary school exams. My father got permission for me to have the exams on my own. Fortunately, I got an arithmetic textbook. I could therefore solve all the problems in the book, and I passed the exam successfully. However, the most terrible experience of my school years was the summer pioneer camp. Collective sports, meetings and parties with young aggressive communists made me suffer. It was unbearable.

In autumn 1941, when the war came close to Moscow, we were evacuated to the Urals. I spent the whole year at home because of rheumatism. It was hardly surprising that I got sick with rheumatism, when the winter temperature fell below minus 40 degrees. And the toilets! There were no bathrooms at the school I attended there; all the toilets were outside. However, I would rather not recall that. In general, personal hygiene was a problem there: people bathed in a public baths. We too went to the public bath once a week.

Nonetheless, I also remember many happy moments. One of the unforgettable events in my childhood was the expensive present I got from my mother: when I was twelve years old, she bought me a watch. I kept wearing that watch for many years. Yes, the watch was considered a very expensive present in Russia at that time, unlike today. Many people thought I was a very spoiled boy.

Then, in 1943, after the Battle for Stalingrad, we returned to Moscow. It was impossible to come back earlier. I started going to a new school. It was not far from my home – just two metro stations away. Studying in that school was a miracle for me, and I will explain why. When I was a 7th grader, I became friendly with two boys in my class, Ed Galperin, and Vitya Ostrovsky, who were very smart, and that was most important. That friendship was one of the unforgettable experiences of my school years. All three of us sat at one desk, and hung out together until we graduated from high school. It was an unusual, experimental school. My friendship with Ed and Vitya, and the very atmosphere in our school, greatly influenced the development of my intelligence and of my cultural appetites.

I was raised in an ordinary Jewish family. Both my parents came from small towns. My father always had a love of Jewish books and traditions, although I would call him neither a strict follower of the Jewish tradition, nor a man of European culture. He learned a lot by himself; he did not have the opportunity to get any formal education in humanities. My father was a self-taught man, one might say.

As for me, I plunged into the world of the Russian intelligentsia, the Russian intellectual space, in that experimental school. It is extremely important to note that the Russian intelligentsia is actually part of the European cultural tradition. That aura of European culture sold me on reading serious books. I started reading books in Russian; I read all the classics of Russian literature, as well as translations of foreign writers. I even remember reading German authors in German. I read avidly.

My friend Edick Galperin was an all-round intellectual. He was eager to know everything! He wanted to study natural sciences and humanities, and was interested in the arts. The three of us often visited Moscow theaters, and discussed plays by Anton Chekhov. Russian Theater has

always been a unique world of intellectual liberty and spirituality. Since theater tickets were very expensive, we used to buy the cheapest ones, the standing-room vouchers. We watched almost all the performances sitting on the stairs. To the best of my recollections, we then always discussed the staging.

After returning to Moscow from the Urals, I gained admittance to the Lenin Library. This library is well-known. One could find all kinds of books there: scientific literature, fiction, childrens's literature. I went to the library every day, even several times a day, so I read many books. I also managed to get Hebrew books, with a special permit. Later on, after I had already become a researcher, I had the opportunity of working in the science department's reading room. To cut a long story short, I had been "an insider" at the Lenin library for years. I had worked in its reading rooms from the age of 15 until my last day in Moscow.

I used to stay in the library until late in the evening. When I was about to immigrate to Israel, I was terribly scared – how I would be able to fit in that land without the Lenin Library!

I was 16 years old when my father offered me a job at the design institute, where he worked in the drawing department. It seemed amazing to me. We were taught to draw and write in ink at school drawing classes. I was able to write in Russian, but the work at the department called for writing in Latin. To this day, I love writing in ink, and can do it well.

Then I fell in love with writing poetry. I could use all the tricks, all kinds of rhyme in my poems. In the end, I admitted to my father that I would like to be a poet. I attended poetry workshop at the Lenin Library. There I became acquainted with genuine literary scholars. After one of them read what I had written, he told me, "Listen, let me tell you: you are rather proficient in the

technique of verse. However, the essence of poetry does not care for technique. You must transmit your feelings in a poem, what others do not know and do not feel either!" He explained me the essence and function of poetry in a very simple language. Well, I thought I could become a poet. In the end, I abandoned that idea. I continued to write poems for fun, for my friends. Something like rhymes and epigrams. I wrote for a long time, but I did not become a poet. My attraction to the linguistic study of words – and of the connections between them – was ultimately more powerful than my talent for poetry. I found that I did not possess a genuine poetic muse, and that I would do better to channel my profound love for languages, for the richness of their vocabularies, through the medium of linguistic research. Even my interest in poetry is a kind of linguist's devotion to the world of words.

What can I say about those years? I pursued languages with a genuine passion. I remember reading books in linguistics at the Lenin Library when I was still in high school. I gained a good understanding of comparative linguistics thanks to those books. I derived knowledge mostly from books rather than from people. However, at that time, I had not realized yet who I was, what my goal in life was, and what my plans for the future were...

From Knowledge of Languages to Linguistics

I continued to follow traditions of the European humanist culture. Many of my classmates wanted to study medicine, like Edick Galperin. He tried to persuade me: "Languages are very interesting; but linguistics is for love, for the soul. Try to learn something for a job, occupation, profession. What will you do with languages?" However, I made an effort to attend the Moscow State University (named after M. Lomonosov), and was rejected. I was not accepted there. It was hardly possible for Jews to enter that University at that time. I then tried to enter the Moscow

Institute of Foreign Languages, and was admitted to the Spanish Language Department. I just turned eighteen.

During my university years, I happened to go to the army: university male students were usually sent to the army camps for so-called reserve training, which lasted two summer months. Students were kept apart from the rest of the soldiers, but the commanders were the same. Apparently, the Government forced intellectuals to feel like soldiers. On the treks, we had to run a few miles in full uniform. I had a grueling time...

I was attracted to Spanish, and I paid attention to the paradigm of the verb in the Romance languages. I noted that the paradigm was virtually the same in Italian, Romanian and even French. The history of the French language, as I had learned, **described** phonetic processes that led to differences between French grammatical forms and those in other Romance languages. I was eager to find out the origins of the variants, hidden behind the external linguistic diversity, so I decided to become a researcher.

Alumni could continue to study in postgraduate programs. However, I always remained a Jew, which was a great disadvantage in the Soviet Union. My colleagues helped me, and finally I took a postgraduate course at the Department of Linguistics. I wrote a dissertation, and defended it brilliantly. Needless to say, my thesis was devoted to the analysis of the Romance languages. I love this language group more than any other. I really consider these languages the most beautiful.

It was 1958, and the time has come for me to get a job. It was practically impossible for a Jew to

get a position in the Institute of Foreign Languages, where I graduated. Fortunately, my colleagues helped me again. I got a part-time job at the Department of Translation. It was hard to live on the salary they paid me. I was constantly searching for extra earnings, and I moonlighted as a translator. Once I got a translation for the military. The document dealt with the different types of weapons used by our so-called “potential adversaries” – the USA, Germany, France and Spain. I got to know about the new submachine guns, including the Israeli Uzzi. Thus, I realized for the first time that Israel released something which was highly valued by professionals.

The Structuralism Sector at the Russian Language Institute was opened in 1961. The Head of the Sector was Sebastian K. Shaumian, who was related to the well-known revolutionary Stepan Shaumian. Sebastian was an intellectual, right-minded and honest man. He invited me to IRYA (the Russian Language Institute), and helped me settle there. Since then, I began working at the Academy of Sciences in the field of Structural and Applied Linguistics, although my heart still yearned for comparative rather than structural linguistics.

There was another Institute of Linguistics in Moscow. Both Institutes (the Russian Language Institute and the Institute of General Linguistics) belonged to the Academy of Sciences and were situated close to each other. The Institute of General Linguistics contained the African Languages sector. It was probably opened for political rather than linguistic reasons. The founder and Head of the Sector was Natalia Veniaminovna Okhotina. She was a specialist in Swahili and an extraordinary woman, well-connected in society. Like Shaumian, she preferred to hire not just linguists, but talented people who could deal, among other things, with African languages.

I was offered a job at the Institute. It was not a problem for linguists to hire a Jew in an Academic Institute. However, in the USSR, one ought to keep in mind “the leading and guiding force of the Communist Party”! The Institute’s party committee did not agree to hire me for anything. There were many prejudices associated with the Jews in the Soviet Union such as, “Admit one Jew to work, and soon the entire department will be Jewish”. Natalia Veniaminovna posed an ultimatum: "Without Aaron Dolgopolsky, the new sector will never start to work!" The ultimatum had its effect. Thus, in 1966, I began to work with the African languages. Why did I need African languages? To research linguistic contrast with European languages, of course. I had many friends among linguists. With Vladimir Dybo, I’ve enjoyed a lifelong friendship. When did I first meet him? I found out that Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov lectured at the Moscow University. Volodya Dybo also attended the course –Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich was his supervisor. So we were acquainted thanks to Ivanov. We used to wander around the streets for hours, discussing the structure of languages. Later, Volodya introduced me to V. Illich-Svitych, from whom he heard about the Nostratic languages.

I already heard about V. Illich-Svitych, a specialist in Slavic languages. I also saw him at the meetings of the linguistic workshop and at the Lenin Library. He had his own place in the Science Department’s reading room; his table always bristled with dictionaries. Once I saw him reading the dictionary of the Komi language. "Why did the Slavicist read the dictionary of Komi language?" I thought then. Today, I do understand why! He worked there every day from morning until night. When Dybo introduced us, we started to communicate. V. Illich-Svitych was a very closed man, a typical introvert. He graduated from Moscow State University, where he had been admitted, because they did not consider him a Jew. V. Illich-Svitych was the first to

take into consideration the similarities between Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic languages. Unfortunately, our companionship did not last long. Soon Illich-Svitych was killed in a car accident. We blamed the Soviet system for his death. He was not a Muscovite by birth, and thus had no right to live in the capital city. He rented a tiny room in a village not far from Moscow. One day, on his way home, he was thinking about Nostratic hypothesis – and a car hit him. For only seven years of work in linguistics, he made incredible progress!

Volodya Dybo knows about 100 languages very well, but he cannot speak them, he was never taught how. Volodya graduated from the University of Gorky. He derived all his knowledge from books, not from his teachers. I also understand books better than people. However, I am slightly different. I love the melody of speech, the music of different dialects.

I have called to mind yet another polyglot, Roman Jakobson. He was perhaps the best structuralist in the world. He spoke many languages, but always with the Russian accent. He wanted everyone to understand that he has come from Russia. We met at the Linguistic Congress in Moscow in 1964 for the first time. Then, almost twenty years later, in 1980, I met him again at Tel Aviv University.

Music of different dialects

I would like to deliver my main message, i.e., what led me to the comparative linguistics. On the one hand, it has been my love of languages; on the other hand, my professional interest in them. Moreover, I enjoy research. What is scientific research for me? What is the beauty of science? The beauty is to uncover the unambiguous source from which the different variants contained in the various texts, thesauruses, dictionaries, emerge. I fell in love with languages at the age of

fourteen. Our experimental school played a very important role in my life. How do I learn languages? My ears are always attentive to speech in different languages.

I remember that, at the age of about six, I walked in the park – not the park, in the garden – and met an Armenian boy of six. I listened to his conversation with his parents. Every year, we went to the village, the so-called dacha, where a boy from Azerbaijan lived in the neighborhood, and we spoke his language.

To say it in a more serious way, my main foreign language is German, which I first came to know through Yiddish. My dad did not know any German, but he did speak Yiddish. In addition, we had been taught German at school because of the War with Germany. We had learned poems by Heine; I still remember them by heart.

Teaching English in Russia was very rare up to the middle of the 20th century. The language became popular there quite recently. In my time, even English poetry was hardly available. A timetable in English hanging on the wall in the library was among the few texts I remember. Once I found a textbook, published before the First World War. There were exercises and parallel texts in German, French, English and Latin there – wasn't that marvelous? In short, there was a lack of written sources in English. In addition, opportunities for listening to a foreign speech, at least on the radio, were also unavailable.

I never learned French systematically; I started learning it quite late, in graduate school. It began when I once got a book in French for beginners. Then I took private lessons. My teacher just spoke with me, nothing else. I acquired the language, even though I speak it with an accent.

I also know Portuguese. There was a student from El Salvador at our institute, who spoke Portuguese. He escaped to Russia from the Latin American Catholics. Then, like many other foreigners in the USSR, he was sent to prison. In 1956, Moscow hosted the Youth Festival. There were about 200 Portuguese-speaking delegates, and I was hired as an interpreter. I was rather a good interpreter, although I did not know the language well.

I have never studied Italian, but I still know the language. I had a very good friend, who was a little bit crazy, but was very fond of languages. He could not adapt to the Soviet reality and finally committed suicide. Thanks to him, I understood how to master languages without learning them. He used to sing songs in Italian, and I still remember them all. Everything is beautiful in Italy, so much so, that the language has its own beauty. I realized that Italian, Spanish and Latin are almost the same.

I wrote a textbook in Latin for myself, and I still keep it. It is hard to understand a text in Latin. The difficulty rests in the difference of mentality. Ancient verbal thinking was quite different as compared to the modern one. One can understand the words, but the content is elusive. I was going to teach Latin at the University.

Let us pass on to the Slavic languages. I got a chance to make acquaintance with the Slavic languages during the War, in the Urals. Our neighbors there came from the Ukraine. Once they gave me a newspaper in Ukrainian. Reading it was very funny. The words sounded almost the same as the Russian ones, but with a funny accent and in a different style. I also learned Polish during the War. We returned to Moscow at the time when the People's Army of Poland was formed from Poles who lived in Russia. I remember the Polish army units in 1943 in Moscow.

I have another story about the Bulgarian language. A biography of one of Stalin's comrades was eminently suitable for learning it. It was relatively easy then to find a biography of Stalin's friends from different countries.

I attended a Sanskrit course in graduate school. I also learned Hebrew, but not in high school. My teacher was Levinstein, a theatrical tailor. According to his method, we only read texts. Levinstein knew spoken Hebrew well, but spoke with a Russian accent.

I can say that I have a good grasp of Arabic. I have an idea of the old Arabic, historical changes of the language. The same way I know modern Tatar and Uralic languages.

Ironically, it was the Soviet state structure that helped me to learn written languages and different alphabets. Special reports of the Council of Nationalities were broadcasted and issued in the languages of all union republics. That is how I learned Georgian and Armenian alphabets. Needless to say, I realized even without theoretical foundation, that the Slavic languages are very close, just as the Germanic languages or Romance languages differ only slightly from one another. Finally, Slavic, Germanic and Romance languages are also close to each other. That is obvious without linguistic knowledge. What does that mean? If you know one language, you can understand another, and understand the changes in languages, the reason for the phonetic differences between words with similar semantics. You can evaluate the proximity of words; an infinite number of different options are reduced to a single invariant, to a single model. There lies the beauty of science.

Outside Linguistics

Let us talk about politics. When I was young, I never doubted the political system. We knew, of course, that we were cheated, but we suspected that capitalists were cheating their people as well. In the capitalist society, people do receive their dose of stupidity in the form of ideology, just the same as in our socialist country! We knew that a human being remains a human being. So, is the difference between capitalism and socialism really so important?

Every day in school, they tried to indoctrinate us, to turn us into Soviet patriots. The dominant ideology of Stalinism was very “patriotic”. Nevertheless, we doubted whether patriotism must be innate. Why was it forbidden to get to know what was going on in the world and not just in your own country? What harm could the knowledge about the whole world do to the love of your own country?

My college years fell at the end of Stalin's regime. The atmosphere in the country was oppressive; nevertheless, more and more people doubted the dominant politics and ideology. Everyone who had a mind of his own had doubts and questions. Stalin was afraid of intellectuals. Postwar repressions were mostly aimed at the cogitative individuals. Restraints had no mercy on veterans, actors, scientists, or doctors. Jews were the principal victims. By 1952, few Jews who represented Jewish culture were left in Russia's cultural space. Some were dead, others broke down, yet others were killed by the regime. Nonetheless, some Jews managed to survive. I knew many of them. For example, the members of Jewish antifascist committee immigrated to the USA, and the Jews of America helped Russia.

There were new ominous trends in the country – the Doctors' case, or Stalin's plan to create a

Jewish autonomous republic (i.e., to transfer all Jews to Siberia, virtually to launch them into eternity). We wandered with my Jewish friends around Moscow streets and discussed what might happen after Stalin's death. Who were his allies? Who of his entourage would inherit the power? Would that be Malenkov? It was obvious that they all were anti-Semites. The fact that Stalin himself was anti-Semitic seemed incredible to us. Georgians had never been anti-Semites. There were anti-Semites in the Ukraine, Poland, to some extent in Russia, but not in Georgia! Malenkov was the closest to Stalin, and Malenkov was an anti-Semite. We were really afraid of the future.

An idea then came into my mind that any government was actually similar to a mafia. I realized that because I saw many proofs around me. People in government were fighting for their places, being themselves just pale figures, non-entities.

I realized what was happening in the government. I suddenly understood why the government needed the ideology. The year of 1952 was very difficult for doctors, especially the Jews. There were people even among the doctors who were well brainwashed by the ideology. Some of them really believed that the Jewish doctors were traitors and agents of imperialism.

In 1953, when I was 23, they announced to us one day that Stalin was dead. Stalin died and went to hell, so the nightmare ended. All Jews in Russia celebrated that day, March 5, 1953, like a Purim. Meanwhile, Malenkov remained alive and kicking.

I think it was in 1954. Malenkov still ruled the country. Once, during the lesson, a man came into our lecture hall and invited me to a special department of the KGB. The man showed me pictures of different people and asked whether I knew any of them. There was a picture of Atkins there (I

do not remember his first name). I guessed that Atkins was related to the Doctors' case. They asked me to translate from French a document related to that case. I completed the translation, and they recorded Atkins' address. I did not even know who Atkins was. He was for me just a guy from the Lenin Library... Atkins was acquainted with Igor, my classmate, also a Jew. I went out of this situation without consequences, because my father was a common person, an ordinary engineer, a man without any important connections in society. Otherwise, I could have been arrested, as many others were, who meant at least something. I was only engaged in research, was just a researcher...

Anti-Semitism is definitely a crime.

Emigration

Finally, as you know, I immigrated to Israel. I had thought about emigration since the early seventies. They began to summon us to a special department for interviews – in fact, for questioning. Those were meetings with the so-called trio: the Director of the Institute, the local leader of the CPSU, and the head of the local trade union committee. They asked me about my attitude towards the Soviet regime, about my world-view. One's way of thinking had to correspond to the official Soviet ideology! They asked me whether I was going to immigrate to Israel. I replied that I could not leave because I was responsible for my students. If I had left, they would have been unable to defend their theses, which would have been a disaster for them. Moreover, the book of which I was a co-author would not have been published. I also removed my name from the title page of one of the academic publications. In short, I prevaricated, maneuvered, trying not to put my friends and colleagues in trouble.

Emigrating from Russia was a problem. Among other things, it was very expensive. First, we

had to pay for being deprived of our Soviet citizenship! It was horrible! Moreover, I could not take my own books out of Russia; I had to get permission, for which I had to pay once more. In the end, the special committee at the Lenin library signed a permit for me, allowing me to send my books abroad. I began to send them to Baruch Podolsky and other friends of mine in Israel.

Meanwhile, I was afraid of going to Israel. What would I do in that small country, without the Lenin Library? I took many things with me. I tried to produce microfilms of all the books I had left behind in Moscow, to gather up the life I had made for myself there. This is a separate story. Every book has its own history. However, as soon as I got off the plane in Ben Gurion Airport, I realized that a new era in my life had begun. The air of freedom made me happy. Moshe Azar, Chair of the Department of the Hebrew Language and Literature at Haifa University, came to see me immediately, as soon as I arrived in Haifa. We spoke French. Israeli linguists were waiting for me. This is my country, my world, my war-and-peace inextricably mixed together. The Six Day War was a real shock. We started thinking about other things, about a new Israel. We believe in Israel as a self-reliant, powerful state.

I have been working on the Nostratic Dictionary since 2000. I am writing about the western dialect of the Nostratic languages. This is, of course, the first serious Nostratic Dictionary.

The Dictionary was published in 2008 in Cambridge. Now, in 2010, Aaron continues to work...