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Some réminiscences

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Some reminiscences

Contribution to the conference dedicated to Isaac Khalatnikov,
Landau Institute, 17-20 October 2019

Dear colleagues,

Dear professor Khalatnikov,

Receiving an invitation to celebrate your hundredth birthday has been a pleasant surprise and a great honor. As a contribution, I wish to present some very ancient recollections.

We met in Moscow, more than half a century ago.

At that time, by the end of the nineteen-sixties, the Cold War had given way to Peaceful Coexistence, but scientists from the East and the West had still the greatest difficulties to meet and establish direct relationship.

Only exceptionally were physicists from Soviet Union allowed to visit Western countries, even for attending conferences.

In France, we had discovered with excitement, through articles and preprints, the pioneering contributions of the Landau School to the quantum theory of condensed matter. They constituted an essential source of inspiration, and we were eager to encounter the authors of these outstanding progresses.

An important step, in such circumstances, has been the creation of periodic Soviet–French symposia, in which you, professor Khalatnikov, took a prominent part.

These meetings have been organized during several years, alternately in Soviet Union and in France. They were profitable to the participants from both communities.

Fruitful scientific exchanges took place in a warm and friendly atmosphere. Joyful spare-time activities in common helped to establish lasting personal relations.

Thus, I had the opportunity to attend colloquia at Bakuriani in Georgia, at Novosibirsk, and to visit Moscow.

I should confess I have completely forgotten the scientific contents of these meetings, although they influenced my research.

But I still keep vivid memories of several pleasant moments. I especially keep in mind a long trip, from Moscow to Zagorsk, where you, professor Khalatnikov, together with your wife, drove Claude Bloch and myself in your own car.

Discovering this vast monastery has been a wonderment, and a striking illustration of old Russia, which I knew only through the nineteenth century literature.

We admired the impressive architecture, the sumptuous decoration, the icons, the treasures, and I was moved by the liturgic music. But we were shocked to see, as a survival of ancient times, lines of poor women prostrating themselves before fat and indifferent priests. The anti-religious museum settled within the walls was useless!

This travel also left me memories of facts belonging to the Soviet era.

It was raining, and whenever you parked your car, you took off the windshield wipers; this puzzled us. You explained that, due to planning, factories produced just one pair of wipers for each car, so a worn-out wiper could be replaced only by stealing a less used one on a parked car.

On the road back to Moscow, we were controlled by policemen, who checked that we were registered in a list that they possessed. We thus discovered that driving foreigners out of Moscow required to report beforehand the route to the authorities.

Such experiences may look exotic to young generations, but I feel they deserve to be recalled.

Dear professor Khalatnikov, I owe you this memorable journey, and I remain grateful for your so cordial hospitality.

I wish to stress how much French physicists are indebted to you, who had so efficiently contributed, through the creation of common symposia, to develop exchanges between our two countries.

I also take this occasion to express my admiration for your scientific work.

And finally, please accept my warmest congratulations and wishes.

Happy birthday!

Roger Balian