In Memoriam

The Square Root

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The November (2010) issue of “Uspekhi Fizicheskikh Nauk” contains V. L. Ginzburg’s last (posthumous) article “About My Father and Our Family.” In it, he brought together what he knew about his parents, relatives, ancestors and descendants. In the last year of his life Vitaly Lazarevich (V. L.) constantly felt that “he had not sufficiently done his filial duty to his father” and had not paid sufficient attention to his roots and his family relationships.

V. L.’s last article is an excellent example of a scientific and humane approach to the subject of human and family relationships during most of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, a subject especially complex and delicate when it deals with such countries as the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation.

At the beginning of the 21st century, using his own memories and those of the few remaining friends and relatives, V. L. reconstructed, bit by bit, some of the main milestones of the history of his, as he puts it, “modest branch of the genealogical tree of the Ginzburgs.”

V. L.’s father had two sisters, Hasya-Liba and Liza (my grandmother). The photograph presented here, which was found in our family archives, shows Lazar Ginzburg with his sister Elisaveta (Liza) to his left, and (apparently) Hasya-Liba to his right. I have never heard anything about Hasya-Liba, but her father wrote on the back of a family photograph of her the words “Hasya-Liba, killed on the first day of Seider 19?? in Novgorod-Volynsk,” most likely during a pogrom.

Fig. 1. Hasya-Liba, Lazar, and Elisaveta Ginzburg. 1916 (?).
I am ashamed to admit that earlier I had learned nothing about my grandmother’s sister, and about my aunts I still know next to nothing. Only after conversations with V. L. and his article did I find out (or remember?) that my grandmother had three daughters, besides her son Samuil (my father). I would sometimes meet Lev Mirkin, the son of one of them, Bella, at the vacation facility of the Russian Academy of Sciences at Mozhinka, and last saw him at V. L.’s funeral. I know nothing about my grandmother’s two other daughters, just like their first cousin V. L.

In his article, V. L. devotes some space to my modest person, his nephew (once-removed), with the same last name. My father, Doctor of Technical Sciences, Samuil A. Ginzburg, born in 1910, was the son of Elisaveta Ginzburg, and thus a first cousin of V. L. An intriguing aspect of our family relationship comes from the fact that my paternal grandfather and grandmother bore (by pure coincidence) the same last name: Alexandr (Sanel) S. Ginzburg married Elisaveta Ginzburg (sister of V. L.’s father, Lazar Ginzburg) in 1897.

V. L. expressed his family feelings more actively than my own parents, and in my childhood, I would fairly often hear that “uncle Vitya Ginzburg” had called to send his best wishes in connection with some holiday or other. And I had no special reverence for V. L., a great physicist already at that time and future Nobel Prize laureate.

In 1966, when V. L. became an Academician (full member of the USSR Academy of Sciences), I graduated from mekhat (Department of Mechanics and Mathematics at Moscow State University) and began working at the Institute of Atmospheric Physics (of the same Academy). Any alumnus of Moscow State University is convinced, that sooner or later, he will become an Academician, so that V. L. and other famous scientists, for us, were people to be imitated rather than revered.

In 1980, when my father died, V. L. was away from Moscow and learned about this from the newspaper Vechernaya Moskva, which, at that time, printed death notices of noteworthy people and even information about doctoral dissertations.