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Lev Vygotsky

Childhood and Youth

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky¹ was born on November 5, 1896 in Orsha, a provincial town in the vicinity of Minsk. Little has been published about his childhood and youth. The few things we know have been related by his childhood friend Dobkin and his daughter Gita L'vovna Vygotskaja. (The latter is currently, together with T. M. Lifanova, preparing a biography of her father which will update all the biographical material so far published (cf. Vygotskaja and Lifanova, 1984; 1988).) Meanwhile, in this chapter and in the introduction to the different sections of the book the currently available biographical material will be presented.

Vygotsky was the second child in a family of eight children. His parents were highly educated members of the Jewish community in Gomel', the father working as a department chief at the United Bank and as a representative of an insurance company. The Vygotskys, apparently, could afford to give their children an excellent education. The availability of a fine library, the fact that the family lived in a very large apartment, and the fact that the children had private tutors: all these circumstances indicate that the Vygotskys were a relatively well-to-do family.

Although the Vygotskys were not very religious they held to the Jewish traditions. Thus young Lev Vygotsky received a traditional Jewish education, reading the Torah in Hebrew, delivering a speech at his Bar Mitsva, and so on. The rather frequent references in his work to the Bible can be understood in this context. He was interested in Jewish culture and folklore and identified to some extent with the history of the Jewish people (cf. his

¹Lev Vygotsky changed his name into Vygotsky, because he believed – after some research of his own – that his family originally came from a village, called Vygotovo. The authors have been unable to establish its location.

discussion of Belyj's "anti-semitism"; Vygotsky, 1916a), and external circumstances encouraged this interest and identification. Among other things, under the Tsarist government Jews were not allowed to live outside the Pale of Settlement, a region in Russia where, until 1907, pogroms were a common occurrence. In his native town, Gornel', Vygotsky himself must have experienced pogroms in 1903 -- fortunately repulsed by an organized Jewish defence (Pinkus, 1988, p. 29) -- and 1906 (Gilbert, 1979). He also witnessed the ignominious return of the Jewish members of the Russian army there. They had been sent back to their home towns after the rumor had been spread that Jewish soldiers were not to be trusted in war-time.

Notwithstanding the pogroms, Russia's war with Germany and Austria, the civil war, and other disasters, Vygotsky attempted to lead a normal life. As a young boy his favorite hobbies were stamp-collecting, chess, and corresponding in Esperanto (Levitin, 1982, p. 27). Somewhere in Iceland a very old man -- or, more likely, his bewildered children -- may now and then skim through a collection of incomprehensible letters sent many years ago by a Russian penfriend.

Vygotsky's friend Dobkin (in Levitin, 1982, p. 26) has related that as an adolescent Vygotsky actively participated with a circle of friends in discussing such highly abstract subjects as Hegel's philosophy of history and the role of the individual in history. He also seems to have loved poetry, in particular Pushkin and Heine -- later Gumilyov, Mandel'shtam and Pasternak -- and frequented the performances in the local theatres. Early reading of Potebnja's "Thought and Language" (1922) may have quickened his interest in psychology.

It was David Vygodsky, a cousin several years older, who had introduced Vygotsky to the Esperanto movement. The cousins were close and corresponded for years after David left for Petrograd in 1919. Part of this correspondence has been preserved in the family archives. David Vygodsky was himself a man of more than average abilities. He became a competent poet, by profession he was a linguist and philologist, and personally he was close to Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky (Levitin, 1982, p. 27). He also knew several foreign languages and became well known as the translator of Russian poetry into Spanish and Hebrew literature into Russian. During the civil war in Spain he served as the intermediary between the Soviet authorities and the anti-Franco movement. Shortly after Franco's victory he was arrested on unknown charges. As is well known, in those dark years the indictments could be based on almost anything. In the case of David Vygodsky the charge of espionage seems the most likely. After all, he had been involved in the Spanish civil war -- unexpectedly lost by the leftist allies -- and he had been very active in the suspect Esperanto movement. (Philatelists and Esperantists were arrested in great numbers by the end of

the thirties. It was assumed that these groups had used their seemingly innocent contacts with foreign citizens as a cover for more sinister practices. See Medvedev, 1974, p. 681.) The writer Marietta Shaginjan has related the unusual and brave attempts of David's literary friends to get him released from prison. Such celebrities as Fedin, Lavrenev, Shklovsky, Slonimsky, Tynjanov, and Zoshchenko wrote to the authorities, declaring David Vygotsky's innocence and demanding his release. The attempts of these Leningrad writers failed, however (Shaginjan in Medvedev, 1974, p. 806), and David Vygotsky was eventually sent to a concentration camp (some letters from there have survived), where he died in 1942 or 1943.

Education

Vygotsky received his first education from private tutors, and later joined the two highest classes of the private Jewish *Gymnasium* in Gomel', graduating with a gold medal in 1913. His further education was influenced by the fact that he was a Jew. In the first place, Tsarist Russia enforced a quota for the admission of Jews to institutions of higher education. The quota for the universities of Petersburg and Moscow was three per cent. In practice, this meant that gold medalists were assured of admission. However, when Vygotsky was taking his examinations, the minister of education issued a circular letter declaring that Jewish students were to be enrolled by casting lots. This was a serious blow to Vygotsky, whose gold medal had now become virtually worthless. Fortunately, he was one of the lucky few and he started taking courses at Moscow University. The choice of subject was again influenced by his Jewish origin. History and philology were unattractive options, as they usually led only to the position of teacher at a secondary school, and since Jews were not allowed to be government officials, the only position available was that of teacher at a private Jewish *Gymnasium*. There were two more attractive possibilities: law and medicine. Law offered the opportunity to become an attorney and attorneys were allowed to live outside the Pale. Medicine guaranteed a modest if uneventful and secure future. At the insistence of his parents Vygotsky applied to the medical department, but after one month he switched to law. He also took other courses and majored in history and philosophy at the Shanjavsky People's University, which was not officially endorsed. However, this was an institute of some quality, since after a strike at the Imperial University many renowned specialists had started teaching there (Levitin, 1982, pp. 29-30).

During his last two years at university in Moscow Vygotsky shared a room with his younger sister Zinaida, who had entered the Non-Credit



Vygotsky's student card at Moscow University. At the time he studied law and still spelled his name with "d".

Woman's University Courses in 1915. Zinaida Vygodskaja was to become a prominent linguist and co-author of several foreign language dictionaries (c.g. Achmanova and Vygodskaja, 1962). It may have been Zinaida – together with David – who kept her brother well-informed of all the developments in linguistics and philology. She also shared an interest in the philosophical writings of Spinoza with Vygotsky.

During his university years Vygotsky maintained his early interests in literature and art. As an adolescent he had started studying Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and had written several drafts of an analysis of it (Vygotsky, 1915a), and his Masters thesis (Vygotsky, 1916d) was the result of this long-standing interest (see chapter 2). A later paper, an analysis of Dostoevsky's writings entitled "Dostoevsky and anti-semitism" seems to have

been lost (Radzikhovsky, personal communication, May 1990). Vygotsky's interests broadened to include psychological and pedagogical problems during this period. A course on "The internal form of the word" given by the Humboldtian scholar Shpet (Shpet, 1927; cf. Mitjushin, 1988) must have encouraged within Vygotsky and his sister, who also took the course, a sensitivity to the internal, psychological aspects of language (see also chapter 15). Around this time Vygotsky also started reading the available international psychological literature. It is said that the reading of James' remarkable study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1985), and Freud's *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (1904/1987) particularly impressed him. These books, incidentally, made a rather odd and unequal pair: first, because the intellectual sophistication of James' fascinating study is well beyond that of Freud's single-minded quest for the id in human daily behaviour; second, because James' devastating criticism of the sexual "explanation" of religious feeling applied to part of Freud's thinking. In fact, James' critique (see James, 1902, pp. 10–12) of what he called "medical materialism" anticipated much of Soviet psychology's future criticisms of Freudian theory (see chapter 5).

It can be argued that Vygotsky's liking for these books revealed an interest in the extreme layers of mind and – in the case of Freud's book – a predilection for speculative studies. It could also be said to form a continuation of his interest in *Hamlet*, whose "other worldliness" and hidden subjective motives were particularly stressed by the young Vygotsky (see chapter 2). Be that as it may, it is clear that Vygotsky's views at the time were still far from the reactological, objectivist views he was to espouse some years later (see chapters 3 and 6).

Formative Years

Having finished his university studies in 1917 Vygotsky returned to his native town Gomel' where, following the Revolution, he was allowed to teach in state schools. It is this period of Vygotsky's life – from 1917 until his move to Moscow in 1924 – that causes the greatest problems for his biographers. What we do know, on the basis of archival documents and reminiscences of contemporaries, is that Vygotsky held many and various positions in the cultural life of Gomel' and became one of its most prominent cultural leaders. What we know very little about is the content of his thinking at this time. This lack of knowledge is caused by an enormous and puzzling gap in the currently known list of Vygotsky's published writings. Indeed, the twenty-year-old Vygotsky had already published four literary reviews in 1916 and approximately twice as many papers in 1924, yet we

find virtually no publications in the seven-year-period in between. The most recent list of Vygotsky's publications (in Vygotsky, 1984b; compiled by T. M. Lifanova) gives only two literary reviews and two unpublished manuscripts for this whole period, while – given Vygotsky's production in other years – one would expect at least thirty or so papers. Although four more literary reviews have been unearthed recently (Vygotsky, 1923a–d), we are still faced with an empty period in Vygotsky's publication history that has to be explained. Observing this same phenomenon Joravsky (1989, p. 255) has suggested that Vygotsky's disciples have refrained from describing this period adequately and from republishing his articles for political reasons. He suggests that "Vygotsky may have consorted with non-Bolsheviks in 1917, for he published in a Jewish periodical (*Novyj Put*) and in one edited by Gorky (*Letopis*) which was critical of the new dictatorship and was soon shut down by it." Although anything is possible, of course, this seems to the present writers not to be the most likely explanation of the gap in Vygotsky's publication history. First, a handful of literary reviews in these same two journals were documented in Vygotsky (1984b) and, moreover, it is not very clear why a former Jewish periodical might not be mentioned in the 1980s. Secondly, there is a more likely candidate for the explanation of the publication gap: the atrocities of the civil war and the occupation by the Germans. At the time Gomel' and its surroundings were harassed by groups of Red and White soldiers, the German army, and bands of local bandits. It is quite possible that one of the battles caused the destruction of local newspaper offices and other archives, as Soviet students of Vygotsky have indeed claimed. If this explanation is the correct one, then our only hope of completing Vygotsky's publication record is that papers will be found in private archives or unexplored public ones.²

While most of Vygotsky's papers of this period are probably still missing, it is possible to get an idea of his life between 1917 and 1924 by analyzing his organizational activities in the cultural life of Gomel' (cf. Fejgina, 1988). It is known that Vygotsky taught at various institutes; among them were the Soviet Labor School (Russian: *Sovetskaja Trudovaja Shkola*) where he taught with his cousin David, and the Gomel' Teacher College (*Pedagogicheskoe Uchilishche*). The latter institute was to play a major role in Vygotsky's development as a scientist, for it was in this institute that Vygotsky set up a small psychological laboratory where students could do simple practical investigations. In this laboratory he performed his own first

²This hope has now been realized: recently T. M. Lifanova and G. L. Vygodskaja found fifty articles in an archive in Leningrad. All of these were reviews of plays staged in the theatres of Gomel' during the period 1921–3 and published in the local newspapers *Nash Ponedel'nik* and *Polesskaja Pravda* (Lifanova, personal communication, February 24, 1991).

experiments on dominant reactions and respiration that provided the material for his talk on reflexological and psychological investigation (Vygotsky, 1926b; see the introduction to Part II and chapter 2). Working at the Gomel' Teacher College he also started preparing one of his first major books: *Pedagogical Psychology* (see chapter 3). The fact that Vygotsky in this period gave talks about the teaching of literature, and investigated the effect of repeated translations on the content of texts, also testifies to his growing pedagogical and psychological interests (Vygotsky, 1922a; 1923e). Other institutes where Vygotsky taught in this period included the Evening School for Adult Workers, the Rabfak (a faculty where those labourers willing to go to the university took a preparatory course), and the Preparatory Courses for Pedagogues: *Kursy Podgotovki Pedagogov*). The subjects Vygotsky taught varied from Russian literature and language to logic, psychology, and pedagogy.

Vygotsky gave talks at various other institutes on esthetics, the history of art, and the above-mentioned subjects, and co-organized the so-called "literary Mondays" where the work of modern and classic poets and writers was presented and discussed. During these nights the writings of Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, Chekhov, Mayakovsky, and Esenin were discussed, as well as some of the hotly debated topics of the day, such as Einstein's theory of relativity. Vygotsky's brilliant lectures attracted large audiences (Kolbanovsky, 1934c, p. 388).

He was also the co-founder of the publishing house Ages and Days -- together with his friend Dobkin and his cousin David -- and of the literary journal *Heather*. Both undertakings were short-lived, though: the publishing house published only two books, one of them with poems by Ehrenburg. The ventures came to an abrupt halt because of a problem that haunts the Soviet Union up to the present day: a shortage of paper (although there has always been enough paper to publish millions of copies of the obtuse works of the leading ideologists).

Vygotsky headed the theater section of the Gomel' department of People's Education (*Narodnoe Obrazovanie*), co-operating with one of its organizers, I. I. Danjushevsky, who would later invite him to Moscow to work in the field of defectology. Vygotsky took an active part in the selection of the repertoire, the choice of the setting, and the directing. He edited the theater section of the local newspaper *Polesskaja Pravda*, where the recently found reviews of Belorussian literature, work by Serafimovich, John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*, and a theater performance by Maximov were published. He never lost his interest in theater, regularly met stage-managers and directors (such as Eisenstein) and near the end of his life published a paper on the psychology of the actor (cf. Vygotsky, 1936d).

One may conclude, then, that Vygotsky was an active and prominent

member of the cultural life of Gomel' and that diverse activities in this field led him to meet other cultural figures, both in Gomel' and in other cities. It is known, for instance, that Vygotsky was in some way acquainted with the poet Mandel'shtam in the early 1920s. In his library a copy of the poet's *Tristia* was found, which was dedicated to Lev Vygotsky (see also chapter 15). As the dedication was printed, it can be dated exactly to 1922, the year of publication of the collection. Of course, Vygotsky may not have known Mandel'shtam very well at that time but in later years he would be a regular guest of the Mandel'shtams for some period. In Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's (1970, p. 241) memoirs we suddenly catch a glimpse of Vygotsky's later private life. She mentions that in 1933 they "also regularly met . . . with Vygotsky, a man of great intellect, a psychologist, the author of the book *Language and Thought*. Vygotsky was fettered to some extent by the rationalism common to all scientists of that period . . ." This perspicuous observation is to some extent confirmed by analysis of Vygotsky's work (see chapters 3 and 9) and by the excerpts from his correspondence given below.

In the meantime, Vygotsky's private circumstances in Gomel' had gradually deteriorated. In the first place, the general situation in Russia was almost hopeless. Because of the civil war, the war with the Western allies, and the first land reforms (see chapter 10) the economy of the country had rapidly deteriorated and it was difficult to get enough food. Moreover, the Vygotsky family was struck by tuberculosis (a disease that was said to be typical of Western bourgeois societies; see chapter 5). For Vygotsky's younger brother Dodik the disease proved fatal and in 1920 Vygotsky himself — who had been looking after his brother — fell seriously ill for the first time and was sent to a sanatorium. His condition became very serious and, expecting to die, he asked the literary critic Yuly Aikhenwald, one of his former professors at the Shanjavsky People's University, to publish his writings posthumously. Fortunately, Vygotsky recovered from this first serious attack of tuberculosis, but the disease was to plague him for the rest of his life, causing remittent attacks, and his death in 1934.

One might wonder why, under these desperate circumstances, Vygotsky did not try to leave for Moscow. Moscow was definitely a center of major cultural and scientific activities, a fact that must have been important to a young man so interested in the theater, art, and literature. In addition, Vygotsky must have made many friends during his years at university there. The explanation given by Dobkin is probably the most accurate (Levitin, 1982, p. 37): Vygotsky did not want to leave his parents during this difficult period, and his reluctance to leave for Moscow may, thus, have been connected with the unstable political situation in the Gomel' area. We have seen how Gomel' was in the crossfire of several armies and groups of bandits roaming the country. Apart from that it was, of course, difficult to

get permission to settle in Moscow and, finally, a love affair may have played its role: in 1924 Vygotsky married Roza Smekhova from Gomel' and left for Moscow.

Summarizing, one may conclude that the Gomel' period marks the origin of Vygotsky's psychological thinking. It was in Gomel' that he performed his first psychological experiments (see chapter 2) and gave his first talks on subjects related to education and psychology. It also was in Gomel' that Vygotsky started to absorb the available psychological, educational, and paedological literature. This reading enabled him to give a course on psychology to his students and to prepare large parts of the textbook *Pedagogical Psychology* (1926i; see chapter 3). The major part of his dissertation, "The psychology of art" (1925j), was also written in Gomel' (see chapter 2), the topic of this book being in line with his fascination for art and theater.

One may conclude, then, that Vygotsky's shift in interest towards problems of psychology, paedology, and education was a very gradual one, but one that had taken place to a considerable extent before he started working at Kornilov's Institute of Experimental Psychology in Moscow. It would be slightly misleading, therefore, to consider him to have been a "school teacher from a provincial town" who, in 1924, suddenly made his début into psychology (see Luria, 1979 and many other Cinderella-type accounts).

The Man and his Cause

As we have seen Vygotsky's life was not always easy and his living conditions were not always conducive to creative scientific work. In the last years of his life the situation grew worse, becoming almost intolerable. To illustrate this, the conditions in which Vygotsky composed his books are revealing. First, he, his wife, and two daughters lived in one room of an overcrowded apartment – conditions he shared with millions of his compatriots. Secondly, in order to earn his living Vygotsky took upon himself an enormous amount of editorial work for publishing houses and a heavy teaching load, the latter involving travel back and forth from Moscow to Leningrad and Kharkov. Thirdly, Vygotsky suffered from recurrent attacks of tuberculosis. Several times the doctors told him that he would die within a few months and many times he had to suffer exhausting and painful treatments. Operations were repeatedly planned and then postponed again, and the regular periods in overcrowded hospitals and sanatoriums could be intrinsically horrific. Vygotsky's analysis of the crisis in psychology (see chapter 7), for example, was started under the following conditions.

I have already been here a week – in large rooms for six severely ill patients, [there is] noise, shouting, no table, etc. The beds are ranged next to each other without any space between them, like in barracks. Added to this I feel physically in agony, morally crushed, and depressed. (Vygotsky in a letter to Sakharov, dated February 15, 1926)

Recovering in a sanatorium one month later he added:

around me there was such a situation all the time, that it was shameful and difficult to take a pen in the hand and impossible to think quietly . . . I feel myself outside of life, more correctly: between life and death; I am not yet desperate, but I have already abandoned all hope. (Vygotsky in a letter to Luria, dated March 5, 1926)

Fourthly, from about 1931 articles critical of his ideas started being published in the major psychology and paedology journals, within the context of a carefully orchestrated attack on his cultural-historical theory. Vygotsky and his colleagues were, of course, well aware of what was going on and the planning of possible replies to these critical articles, the talks with influential persons to assess the hidden meaning and danger of attacks etc., took immense amounts of time (see chapter 16). Finally, Vygotsky was deeply hurt by the “desertion” of several of his co-workers and students, who left him and his ideas to form the so-called Kharkov group (see the introductions to parts II and III). From very early in his professional life he had seen the development of a new science of man as his cause, a cause he took extremely seriously and to which he dedicated all his energy. Reading his letters to his co-workers and students one gets the impression that Vygotsky and his group formed an almost quasi-religious movement, so overwhelming was the conviction that they were on the right track towards the development of the new science and so great was the respect for Vygotsky as the group’s leader. This feeling of a common cause that was worth fighting for, despite pressure, criticism, and indifference from the outside world, had already developed by 1926, as becomes clear from one of Vygotsky’s letters to Luria. “I very much deplore the fact that in this difficult time of crisis I am not with you at the institute . . . How seriously we have to think about our [scientific] fate and the fate of the cause that we undertook, when KN [Kornilov] and the other ‘bosses’ do not wish to think about it.” (Vygotsky in a letter to Luria, dated March 5, 1926)

In a later letter to five of his students and collaborators (Bozhovich, Levina, Morozova, Slavina, and Zaporozhec) Vygotsky related his amazement about the fact that first Luria and then Leont’ev started following him on this difficult road towards a new science:

I had a feeling of enormous surprise when A. R. [Luria] in his time was the first to follow this road, and when A. N. [Leont'ev] followed him. Now to the surprise joy is added, that by the detected signposts the big road is visible not only to me, not only to the three of us, but to another five persons. The feeling of the immensity and massiveness of the contemporary psychological work (we live in a period of geological cataclysms in psychology) is my main emotion. But this makes the situation of those few who follow the new line in science (especially in the science of man) infinitely responsible, serious to the highest degree, almost tragic (in the best and real, and not in the pathetic meaning of this word). A thousand times one has to put oneself to the test, to check [oneself], to stand the ordeal before deciding, for it is a very difficult road that requires the whole person. (Vygotsky in a letter to his five students, dated April 15, 1929)

Vygotsky often repeated this theme of total dedication to the common cause and he felt irritated and hurt when colleagues, such as Zankov and Solov'ev, hesitated to embark on this new path in psychology (Vygotsky in letters to Leont'ev, dated August 11 and 23, 1929).

It was his rare charm and personal warmth that enabled Vygotsky to make other people join the project. Kolbanovsky (1934c) has related his kindness, responsiveness, sensitivity, and tenderness as a young boy and the modesty and tactfulness evident in his dealings with others less talented than himself. In later years he gave fascinating lectures that attracted large audiences and had a truly mesmerizing effect on most people.³ One of his pupils described them like this:

It is hard to determine what exactly attracted us in the lectures of Lev Semyonovich. Apart from their deep and interesting content we were charmed by his genuine sincerity, the continual striving upwards with which he captivated his listeners, [and] the beautiful literary expression of his thought. The sound of his soft baritone itself, flexible and rich in intonation, produced a sort of esthetic delight. You very much wanted to experience the hypnotizing influence of his speech and it was difficult to refrain the involuntary feeling of disappointment when it stopped. (Quoted by Kolbanovsky, 1934c, p. 388)

³Gal'perin (in Haenen, 1989, p. 16) has claimed that Vygotsky's verbal gift verged on pathology. To explain: Seeing a picture Vygotsky could not well understand it. He could tell what he saw, but the sense, meaning, and quality of it eluded him. However, telling another person about the same picture Vygotsky could tell more than this person would see himself and only then did the picture start becoming intelligible for him as well. Gal'perin concluded that everything was focused on speech for Vygotsky, a conclusion strengthened by Vygotsky's own words ("You remember, I always talk – about chimeras and ideas") in a letter to Leont'ev, dated July 11, 1929.

One should not think, however, that Vygotsky was merely a warm, sensitive, and deeply serious person. He also had a keen sense of humor, appreciated the lighter side of life (in a letter to Luría, dated July 26, 1927, he urged him to drink much of the excellent southern wine) and at times could be very sarcastic and sharp. Moreover, he was no dreamer, but a person who was acutely aware of what was going on in the Soviet Union and a keen observer of the personal degradations and dramas it entailed. When he felt betrayed or treated unfairly by people – as in the case of Leont'ev and Luría (see the introduction to part III) – he reacted with vigor and decisively, treating the culprits with severity and not accepting any apologies. But on the whole he seems to have had a surprising talent to avoid personal quarrels, in-group fighting, etc. Whilst being a very sensitive person⁴ in terms of inter-personal relations, at the same time he seems to have been detached in some way, an observer at the sideline of an on-going situation. Somehow he distanced himself from turmoil and watched with great objectivity what was going on, trying to find its hidden meaning.

It is tempting to explain his fascination with Spinoza by reference to this personality trait. A rational, cultivated person should “not give way to amazement, not laugh, not cry, but understand” as Vygotsky paraphrased his favorite philosopher in the preface to “The Psychology of Art” (Vygotsky, 1925/1986, p. 18). One should always attempt to control one’s emotions and to subject them to the control of the intellect (“Even about oneself one should not judge subjectively,” Vygotsky in a letter to Leont'ev, dated July 31, 1930). One should never give way to the lower passions, but rather climb the rational ladder and be more refined and detached in one’s judgements. This life-attitude also comes out in the cultural–historical theory (see chapter 9) and in Vygotsky’s personal letters to his students and colleagues. In a reply to Morozova, for example – who had written to him about her depressed state of mind – he stated that “with such moods you have to fight and it is possible to cope with them. Man overcomes nature outside himself, but also in himself, this is – isn’t it – the crux of our psychology and ethics” (Vygotsky in a letter to Morozova, dated July 29, 1930). In a second letter he elaborated on this theme telling Morozova that one should never become the victim of one’s moods and passions. “The rule

⁴Kolbanovsky (1934c, pp. 394–5) has related a somewhat absurd consequence of this sensitivity. Although having an excellent command of several foreign languages Vygotsky refused to speak them and used interpreters to correspond with foreign visitors. To Kolbanovsky’s question why he refrained from speaking foreign languages Vygotsky replied: “Even an excellent knowledge of a foreign language cannot safeguard you against an incorrect accent. My speech, even if correct by content and form, will pain the ear of the foreigner listening to me and may because laughter or other inadequate emotions. Out of politeness my interlocutor will try to suppress them. This will make him suffer. Why should I torture him?”

here – in a mental struggle and in the submission of unruly and strong opponents – is the same as in all submission: *divide et impera*, that is, divide and rule . . . You have to divide them [the feelings and moods] . . . To surmount them – that is probably the most correct expression for the mastering of emotions . . . to find a way out is simply a question of mental effort” (Vygotsky in a letter to Morozova, dated August 19, 1930).

Accepting Nadezhda Mandel’shtam’s claim that Vygotsky was some sort of a rationalist it should be added that he was not the type of a rationalist who denies any meaning or sense to life. Vygotsky seems to have been convinced that the creative struggle, called life (see chapter 3), had some inner meaning and that life’s appearance and its essence do not coincide. A letter to his student Levina best exemplifies this basic conviction:

Now about another theme about which you write. About inner disharmonies, the difficulty of living, I have just finished reading (almost by chance) Chekhov’s *Three Years*. Perhaps, you too should read it. That is life. It is deeper, broader than its external expression. Everything in it changes. Everything becomes otherwise. The main thing – always and now, it seems to me – is not to identify life with its external expression and that is all. Then, lending an ear to life (this is the most important virtue, a somewhat passive attitude in the beginning), you will find in yourself, outside yourself, in everything, so much that none of us can accommodate it. Of course, you cannot live without spiritually giving a meaning to life. Without philosophy (your own, personal, life philosophy) there can be nihilism, cynicism, suicide, but not life. But everybody has his philosophy, of course. Apparently, you have to grow it in yourself, to give it space inside yourself, because it sustains life in us. Then there is art, for me – poems, for another – music. Then there is work. What can shake a person looking for truth! How much inner light, warmth, support there is in this quest itself! And then there is the most important – life itself – the sky, the sun, love, people, suffering. Those are not simply words, it exists. It is real. It is interwoven in life. Crises are no temporary phenomena, but inner life’s road. When we pass from systems to fates (pronouncing this word is terrifying and joyful at the same time, knowing that tomorrow we will investigate what is hidden behind it), to the birth and downfall of systems, we see it with our own eyes. I am convinced of it. In particular, all of us, looking at our past, see that we dry up. That is correct. That is true. To develop is to die. It is particularly acute in critical epochs – with you, in my age again. Dostoevsky wrote with horror about the drying up of the heart. Gogol still more horrifying. It is really “a small death” inside ourselves. And that is the way we have to accept it. But behind all this is life, that is, movement, travel, your own fate (Nietzsche taught the *amor fati* – the love of your fate). But I started philosophizing . . . (Vygotsky in a letter to Levina, dated July 16, 1931).

To understand the hidden meaning behind “the sky, the sun, love, people, suffering,” to understand the travel towards death. That may have been Vygotsky’s ultimate goal throughout his intellectual life, from his analysis of *Hamlet* to his development of the cultural–historical theory, and further on. In his cultural–historical theory he attempted to sketch how cultural man attempts to overcome the “stikhia” (Greek: *stoicheion*), the elemental chaos of nature, through the creation of cultural instruments. Deeply appreciating the finest artifacts of culture Vygotsky persisted in believing that the “stikhia” would be overcome by culture and that a new human society would be its result.

The End

Despite his generally detached attitude and his Spinozist philosophy Vygotsky must have suffered from the growing ideological pressure, the disintegration of his group of collaborators, and the personal betrayals that took place towards the end of his life. His friend Dobkin remembers visiting Vygotsky during the last year of his life. Apparently, Vygotsky was in a bad physical condition and a depressed state of mind, and contemplating accepting a position at the primate center of Sukhumi. Vygotsky’s close collaborator Zeigarnik (1988, p. 179) – in an interview published by Jaroshevsky – has recently confirmed Dobkin’s account, claiming that Vygotsky “did everything not to live” in the last years of his life. Both accounts are emphatically denied by Vygotsky’s daughter, G. L. Vygods-kaja, who distinctly remembers that her father was full of energy and new plans during his (apparent) recovery in the final month of his life (personal communication, 1989). Apparently, toward the end of his life Vygotsky was offered the possibility of setting up and heading a section within the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine in Moscow. He was very enthusiastic about this plan as it offered the possibility of picking his own research team and carrying out his new research plans. There is no way of knowing which of these versions is accurate, nor is there any need. For it may well be that Vygotsky worked extremely hard at times – giving the impression that he was careless about his health but perhaps trying to accomplish as much as possible before his death (that, after all, was announced several times) – and was occasionally deeply depressed but still managed to find the energy to make new plans in the final month of his life.

Be that as it may, after repeated haemorrhages -- on May 9, May 25, and during the night of June 10–11 -- in the early morning of June 11, 1934 Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky died in the Serebrannyj Bor Sanatorium of tuber-

culosis, the disease he had suffered from for fourteen years. He was buried at the Novodevichy cemetery in Moscow. Vygotsky left behind a handful of books, many articles, and drawers full of unpublished manuscripts. Above all, he left behind a loving family and a devoted group of students who would do everything to protect Vygotsky's heritage in the difficult years to come and to promote his ideas. Now, more than fifty years after his death, Vygotsky's ideas are becoming well known in the scientific world — a process that is still insufficiently understood.