

## REMINISCENCE ABOUT B.V. GNEDENKO

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I would like to begin a series of stories with the case, which characterizes Boris Vladimirovich Gnedenko not only as a brilliant scientist and outstanding teacher whom some of us knew him personally and other – from his books and papers, but also as wonderful personality – principal and brave.



B. V. Gnedenko at his working table at home.  
(The end of 70th.)

### Feat nobody has known about

At the banquet after Doctoral dissertation of A.D. Solovyev, Andrei Nikolaevich Kolmogorov pronounced a toast in honor of B.V. Gnedenko: “I wish to drink this glass of wine for Boris Vladimirovich who is not only a leader of the Reliability School. I wish to drink for him as for a brave citizen”. It was a very unusual speech for Kolmogorov, who was always far from “official” words even with a slight color of the so-called “Soviet patriotism”. I decided that something unusual was behind those words, and being unable to silence my curiosity, sat next to Kolmogorov and asked Andrei Nikolaevich what he meant under “brave citizen”.

Kolmogorov answered, as usually very short and abruptly: “The matter is, Igor Alexeevich, that Boris in that terrible 1937<sup>th</sup> saved life to some person...” It was said in such a way that I understood that Kolmogorov by some reason did not like give more detailed explanations...

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Boris Vladimirovich and myself were tied not only by personal contacts. We had a lot of mutual duties: I was his deputy at journal “Reliability and Quality Control”, where he was Editor-in-Chief; I was his deputy in Central Consulting Center on Reliability and Quality, where he was Scientific Chair; we have been working together at Editorial board of journal “Engineering Cybernetics (he was a Chair of section “Queueing

Theory and Reliability” and I was Scientific Secretary of the journal); we were members of Editorial Council at “Soviet Radio” publishing House and an at couple of Scientific Councils for Doctoral degrees.



Boris Gnedenko and Igor Ushakov discussing current editorial business. (The end of 70th.)

Thus, at least two-three times a week, I met with Boris Vladimirovich at his home. Those meetings with him were unforgettable: Turgenev-like leisurely conversations “about nothing” with a beautiful classical music on background, and as a result – all business question have been solved!

Maybe, it is kind of a nostalgia born by age, though maybe it is a part of reality: sometimes I believe that such kind of personal contacts have gone forever...

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Once I came in the evening to Boris Vladimirovich but he was late: something kept him at the University. Natalya Konstantinovna, his wife, served a tea, and we were sitting and talking. As usual, a dining table was full of various homemade jams and cookies. Drinking the tea, I told her about the

question I asked Kolmogorov at the banquet and asked her what could that mean.

She told me that in 1937 somebody wrote an anonymous slanderous report on Kolmogorov, saying that he led anti-Soviet propaganda among his pupils. However, KGB pretended to play a “clean” game: they needed confirmation made by somebody in person. Their choice was Boris Gnedenko – the beloved pupil and best personal friend of Kolmogorov.

Gnedenko has been arrested and has been kept in a Lubyanka torture-chamber (Lubyanka was the Head Quarter of the KGB) several months. They did not give him to sleep, directing in his face extremely bright light that made him unconscious and psychically degraded. Nevertheless, Gnedenko did not sign any papers against Kolmogorov they gave him. At last, he was released. Acquisitions against Kolmogorov had been fallen as inconsistent...

Natalya Konstantinovna told me: “Igor, please don’t tell anybody about it: nor Andrei, neither Boris like to remember all this. In addition they don’t like exposing their personal relations to the public”.

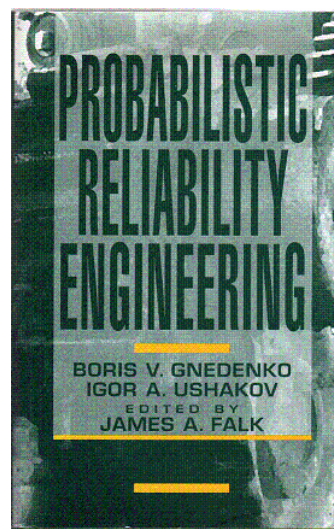
Sure, I would never wrote about it if Boris Vladimirovich did not tell this himself during one of his visit to the USA in 1991, when I arrange his invitation through George Washington University. He was interviewed for journal «Statistical Science»<sup>3</sup>.

Then once more I heard this story from Gnedenko when he visited American telephone company MCI where I then worked as a consultant.

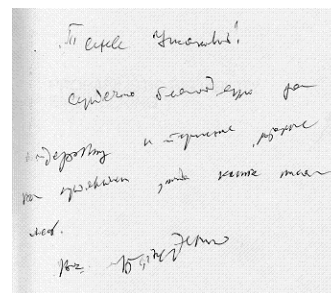
Once we sat with Gnedenko alone, at my apartment in Washington and had a conversation “about life”. Unfortunately, I guessed too late to turn on a tape recorder... Boris Vladimirovich patiently waited when I change tapes. Though I missed his story about his imprisoning, the remaining part of that conversation was extremely interesting. Boris Vladimirovich told me about his first meeting with his future wife, about Kolmogorov, his teacher, and about his pupils – Mikhalevich, Kovalenko, Korolyuk, Skorokhod and others. I remember that I complained that I was not his pupil, and he responded with his soft humor: “However, you are unique inn my experience: you are the only one to whom I was the defender at both scientific defenses – at candidate and doctoral”.

We talked a lot about music and fine art, about our visit to the National Gallery in Washington, where we were recently with him and his son, Dimitri (he accompanied his father in his visits to the USA).

Last time I saw Boris Vladimirovich three months before he died... I was in Moscow and visited him several times. I brought him our first book published in the USA – “*Probabilistic Reliability Engineering*”.



I had a movie camera with me and Gnedenko asked me to record “a letter to Tanya”, my wife who helped us in preparation of the manuscript. Then he signed a copy for her:



“To Tanya Ushakov with gratitude for support and patience, which you showed during the book preparation. Yours Boris Gnedenko”.

It was written by a trembling hand of a deeply ill man who, nevertheless, did not forget to about Good and Love for others.

He never saw our second book, “*Statistical Reliability Engineering*”...

<sup>3</sup> Statistical Science, 1992, Vol.7, No.2, pp.273-283: N.Singpurwalla & R. Smith “A Conversation with Boris Vladimirovich Gnedenko”.