

## Thrust of Life: Two Gnedenko's Visits to the United States

Igor Ushakov

It won't be an exaggeration to say that I never met a man with a stronger thirst for life, creating good around him, and being a courageous man who also faced life's test and terrible illness...

I was really lucky: I had been working with Boris Vladimirovich for many years shoulder-to-shoulder, traveled with him many business trips, spent many evenings with his hospitable family, he was my guest as well many times...

It was my great privilege: Gnedenko visited me twice in the United States when I was working at The George Washington University: in spring of 1991 and in summer of 1993. I will try to present a "photo report" of these events using only few words for comments.

### USA-91

Just before B.V.'s visit I was appointed to an open-heart surgery. I begged my surgeon to postpone the surgery for two days because I had to meet my teacher at airport who flew from Moscow. My surgeon agreed with me that I will survive extra couple days without an artificial valve...

Below: we met at the Washington's Dallas Airport. As you can see B.V. – as usual, ~~was~~ strong and smiling: nothing showed that he was already very sick... On his right – his son, Dimitri.



In an hour, we were back at our place. Back then we lived in Arlington VA, which was close enough to The George Washington University.

It seems the long flight from Moscow did not make B.V. tired.



Our first dinner: from left to right – Tatyana Ushakov, Dimitri Gnedenko and B.V



Another dinner: the table is full of everything (including, of course, a bottle of "Stoli").



B.V. with his unavoidable glass of water and his constant kind smile. He seemed not tired though the day was tough enough: lecturing, visits...



When local university “paparazzi” had known about B.V.’s visit to the Operations Research Department, they came immediately. This photo made for the University weekly newspaper at my office.



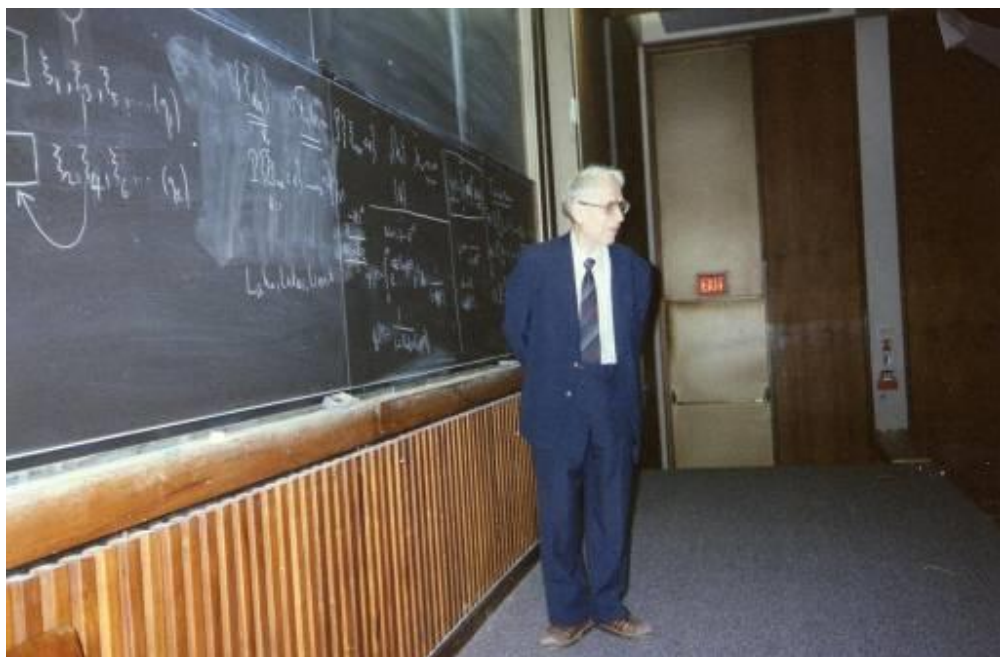
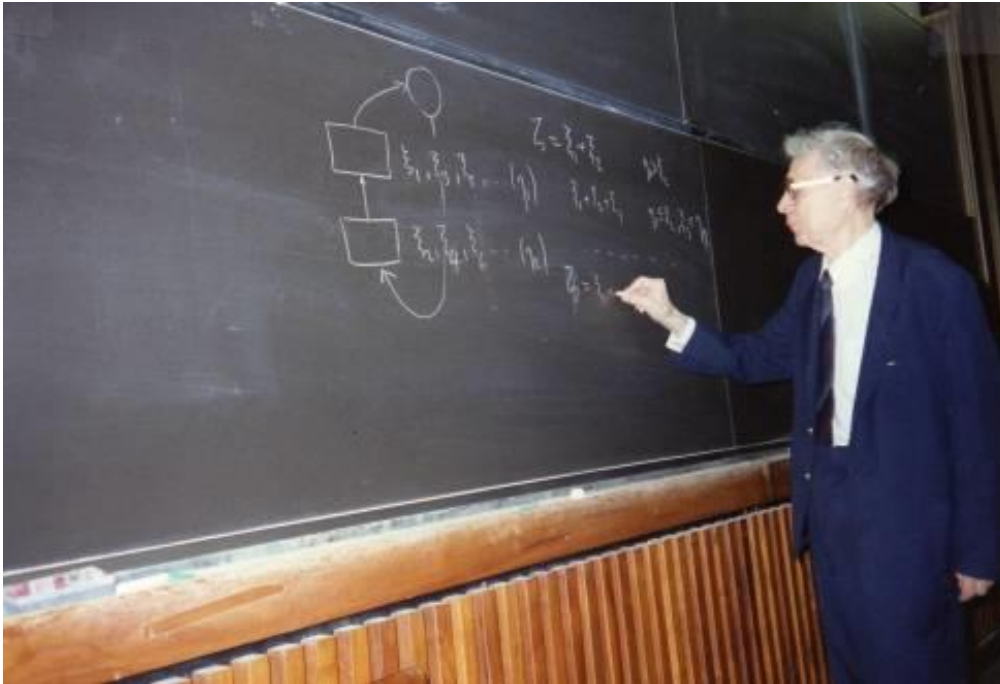
Here B.V. and I visited Professor James Falk who later was the editor of the book written by B.V. and myself *Probabilistic Reliability Engineering* (John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1995).



Three days later after B.V. arrival I was at the University Hospital for the surgery. During those days, B.V. visited Professor Richard Smith at the University of North Carolina. By the time he came back, it has been five days pass, I was back on my feet: American hospitals are fast! The next day, still with pain in my broken chest, I was at B.V.'s lecture as an interpreter...



As usual, B.V. was lecturing tremendously. Of course, he did not need me as an interpreter, though I stayed at the podium hiding behind a lectern: I could not step down without someone's help. So I sat there very still, it was extremely painful to move...



When B.V. finished the lecture and applause became silent, B.V. helped me rise to my feet. He took my elbow and we slowly went down the steps off the podium. At that moment I joked: "B.V., can you imagine what everybody is thinking, it is I who should be supporting you, not the other way around..." B.V. stopped in place and, shaking from laughing, said: "Igor, don't joke like this! I am afraid that we both might loose our balance and fall down..."

Once there was B.V.'s interview with Professors Nozer Singpurwalla and Richard Smith at which Dimitri and I were attending. (One could find that interview at No. 1 of our Journal.)



At one of our dinners, Professor Falk with his wife Jean were our guests. It seems me that then we asked Jim to be the editor of our book.



B.V. and myself spent a lot of time walking in Washington, D.C. He was very attentive to my conditions after the surgery, though my believe is that those frequent promenades made me physically stronger in a very short time. When we walked through Arlington cemetery, B.V. sadly joked: "Here we are, at the meeting with our future..."



We spoke about various things, though almost never on professional themes. B.V. was connoisseur in poetry, music, fine art... Once I remarked that I did not like anything created by Felix Mendelssohn but his Violin Concerto... B.V. did not point out my mistakes, but simply told me: "Igor, try to listen to Mendelssohn's music more. I'm sure that you will love him..." And that is exactly what happened! Now Mendelssohn's CD's are next to Rachmaninov, Beethoven and Mozart.



Next, I confessed that I did not like Pushkin<sup>3</sup>: “I understand that he is a great poet but emotionally I do not connect with his writing...” B.V. responded: “Understanding of Pushkin came with age...” Well... I guess I am still too young for it!



Our evenings were social. Washington mathematicians invited B.V. for dinners where he always a center of gravitation. In those international communities his knowledge of English, German and French was very useful...

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Pushkin is a great Russian poet.





### USA-91

In two years B.V. came to visit again. This time I was able to arrange his visit to one of the leading telecommunication company MCI. Though B.V.'s illness was progressing, nobody except us could tell anything was wrong. Being so much around him we began to notice that he got tired earlier.



Nevertheless, he was always in the epicenter of any discussion, his eyes were always glistering with sincere interest to various problems. He compiled a dense plan of visits around the country.

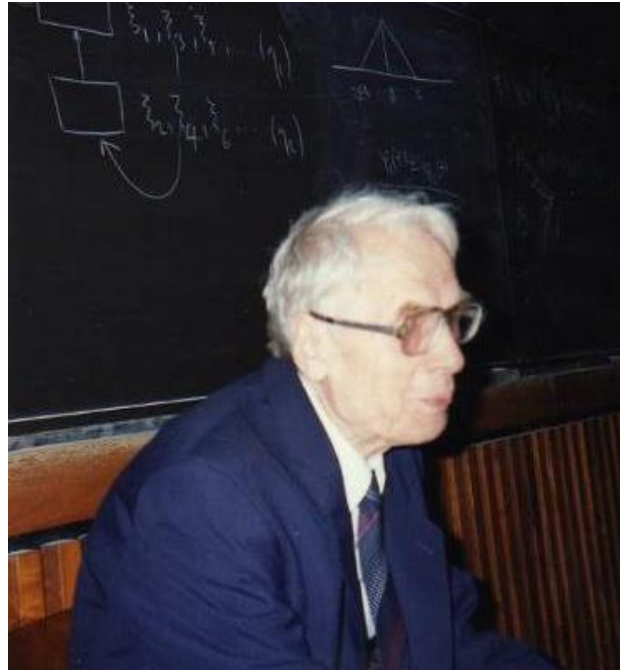


His first visit was to MCI Headquarter near Dallas (TX). He was introduced to the audience by Chief Scientist Chris Hardy who first of all told how he convinced MCI top managers to invite Gnedenko: "I told to the President of the company that visit of Professor Gnedenko to us is equivalent to visit Norbert Wiener to Los Alamos Labs. It is a great honor for us!"

The photo below shows how Chris introduced B.V. to the MCI scientific community.



After the introduction, B.V. began with his lecture touching on some problems similar to the company interests. That time he lectured sitting down on the chair: it was right after a long flight from Washington.



The next day B.V. was accompanied by Dimitri and myself, took a plane to Boston where we were met by my former PhD student Eugene Litvak from the Harvard University. Photo below: E. Litvak, D. Gnedenko, B. Gnedenko and the author.



Since the audience was not “too mathematical”, B.V. chose an intriguing topic: “Probability Theory from Medieval to Modern Times”. It is time to point out that B.V. had always felt the audience and possessed an astonishing ability of adaptation and changing the style and the level of his presentation.



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## COLLOQUIUM SERIES

**Professor Boris V. Gnedenko**

Chairman, Department of Probability Theory  
Moscow University

will speak on

### "Probability Theory and Mathematical Statistics from Medieval to Modern Times"

Monday, December 13, 1993

4:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Kresge, Room G-3

Coffee, tea and cookies

3:30 - 4:00 p.m.

Outside Kresge, Room G-3

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER:** Professor Gnedenko is one of the greatest living probabilists. His contributions to probability theory and statistics have ensured his place in the history of Mathematics. His results in limit distributions of ordered statistics and summation of random variables are classical. He was one of the creators of Queuing Theory and Reliability Theory. Professor Gnedenko was a pupil, colleague, co-author and a personal friend of Professor Andrey Kolmogorov, one of the creators of Modern Probability Theory. Among their joint publications is the well known book *Limit Distributions for Sums of Random Variables*.

Professor Gnedenko wrote a comprehensive and intriguing historical review which was published in the last edition of his famous *The Theory of Probability*. This textbook has been standard for many generations of mathematicians.

Professor Gnedenko is an Honorary Member of the American Statistical Society and the Royal Statistical Society as well as an Honorary Professor at the University of Berlin and the University of Athens.

This talk is co-sponsored by SOFAS Inc., Reckville, Maryland.

B.V. was at his best. I knew that history of mathematics was “his love” but never imagined that it was possible to tell about such “dry subject” so vividly!



Immediately after the lecture Dimitri measured B.V.'s blood pressure. He was an excellent “family doctor” who knows when and what medicine should be given to his father...



It seems to me that it was the last serious B.V.'s trip... Time was inexorable... The illness became out of control. Nevertheless, he continued to work, wrote several books simultaneously.

When I visited B.V. the last time in Moscow in the summer of 1995, he practically did not leave his chair in the dining room. I brought with me our book *Probabilistic Reliability Engineering* that has been published recently by John Wiley. Our second book *Statistical Reliability Engineering* in co-authorship with my pupil Igor Pavlov was published in 1999... Sadly Boris Vladimirovich already has passed away...