

Some Remembrances of Luria

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Некоторые воспоминания о Лурии

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At the beginning of 1972, I went to Moscow, to the Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology (as the current Institute of Psychology of the Russian Academy of Education was then called), to conduct a research project in the Laboratory of Psychophysiology of Individual Differences, directed by Vladimir D. Nebylitsyn. My interest was strictly psychophysiological and, together with Vladimir M. Rusalov, Nebylitsyn's assistant, I studied electroencephalographic variations in human beings during an attention task. As part of my study program, I also asked to meet the most famous Soviet psychologists of the time and, to my great pleasure, I had the opportunity to meet and discuss with eminent personalities such as Alexei N. Leontyev, Filipp V. Bassin, Anatoly A. Smirnov, Vladimir P. Zinchenko, Daniil B. El'konin, Boris F. Lomov (with whom I also formed a personal relationship, having then spent further periods of study in the Institute of Psychology of the Academy of Sciences headed by him), etc. These meetings were usually officially scheduled and were communicated to me through Rusalov.

With Luria, the meeting took place in a different manner. I was staying in the Hotel of the Academy of Sciences and one evening I received a phone call: it was Luria himself telling me he was happy to meet me. On the appointed day and time, I had to go to his house (Ulitsa Frunze, 13) where I would find his driver who would take me to the sanatorium where he was staying

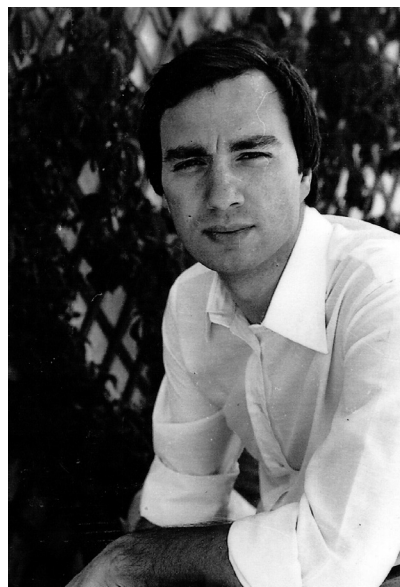


Fig. 1. Luciano Mecacci (1972)

for a rest. I, then 25-years young (Fig. 1), was rather embarrassed at the thought of finding myself in front of this world-renowned scientist (Luria was 70 years old). As soon as I arrived, however, my anxiety vanished thanks to Aleksandr Romanovich's warmth. First, he explained to me that the Sanatorium had previously been a summer residence of Pavel Tretyakov, the famous art collector. Luria asked me if I knew who he was

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and fortunately I did because I had visited the Tretyakov Gallery a few days earlier. Another question followed. Luria asked me if I liked Amedeo Modigliani's paintings. Again I had no problem answering. I told him that I also knew Modigliani well because he was born in the same Italian city (Livorno) as I was. Having passed the art history exam, we began to talk about psychology. Luria appreciated Nebylitsyn's research in psychophysiology, but at the time I did not realize that Luria's approach to individual psychological differences was not quite the same. He introduced me to the matter of clinical cases by asking me to read his books on the *The Mind of a Mnemonist* and the Zasetky case (*The Man with a Shattered World*). Right from this first meeting, we started a project for the translation of his works into Italian (Fig. 2). In addition to the two aforementioned "small" books, his course of lectures in psychology and a collection of articles edited by me together with the neuropsychologist Edoardo Bisiach were translated (Bisiach had already spent some time at the Burdenko Institute and had translated the book *Higher Cortical Functions in Man*). In addition, Luria encouraged me to write a short history of the relationship between neurophysiology and psychology in Russia. The book came out in Italian in 1977 and was then translated into English (*Brain and History. The Relationship between Neurophysiology and Psychology in Soviet Research*, Brunner/Mazel: New York, 1979). Luria wrote the preface, a contribution that obviously lent greater authority to my first book.

I would like to mention two general aspects of Luria's scientific work that had a particular influence on both my experimental and historical research. When I arrived in Moscow, I knew Vygotsky only as the author of *Thinking and Speech*. I knew nothing about the historical problems related to the banning of pedology in 1936 and the fact that Vygotsky's works could only be reprinted, and then partially, from 1956 onwards. When I showed a particular interest in these facts, Luria introduced me to Gita Vygodskaya, the great psychologist's daughter. Gita L'ovna showed me both the few remaining manuscript pages of *Thinking and Speech* (these pages were later photocopied for me thanks to Vladimir Rusalov) and the works that were banned in 1936. A new world opened up to me, to which I have dedicated many years. In 1990, I published the first complete world edition of *Thinking and Speech*, showing page by page the changes and cuts that were made in the Russian reprints of 1956 and 1982. This work was dedicated to Gita L'ovna, but it was also an explicit homage to Luria, who led me to understand the value of Lev Vygotsky. The other aspect concerns the historical development of brain functions: how the functional organisation of the brain depends on the specific historical and cultural context in which

a human being grows up. I have written several articles and books on this subject.

I personally visited Luria in the first semester of 1972, then in the winter of 1975. Until his death in August 1977, we shared a continuous correspondence that I still jealously preserve (Fig. 2). On days when I was free from my experiments at the Institute of Psychology, I would go to observe how Luria analysed his clinical cases in the Neuropsychology Laboratory of the Burdenko Neurosurgical Institute. More than once, I went to his house, then together we took a trolley bus, always crowded, and finally walked the hospital in the snow. With his quick step, despite his age, I couldn't help but noticed his energy. He put the same energetic determination into examining his patients, while a group of pupils and coworkers painstakingly took notes. I realised how important the personality of the examiner was and how Luria could sum up decades of clinical and experimental research in a seemingly simple question. For me, it was the greatest lesson I had ever received.

Luria was notoriously kind and welcoming to foreign

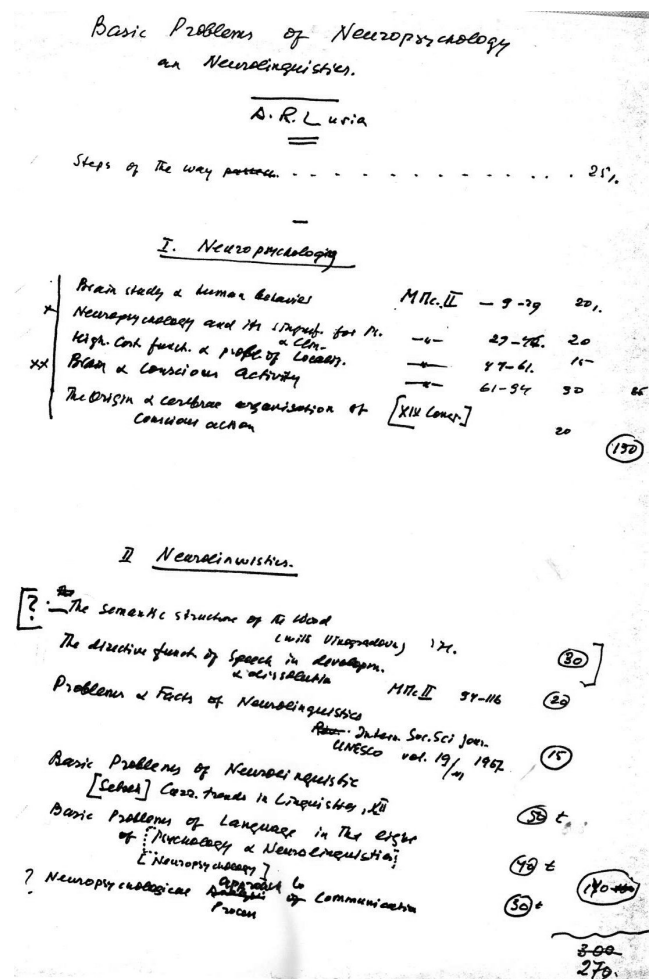


Fig. 2. The sketch of Luria's autograph for the collection: Neuropsychology and NeuroLinguistics / edited by E. Bisiach and L. Mecacci (Rome, 1974)

students. I visited Frunze Street for dinner many times: sometimes it was a simple borsch, other times refined Russian cuisine. I always remember with nostalgia when his wife Lana Pimenovna and his daughter Elena Alexandrovna would prepare a special Uzbek dinner (Luria loved Uzbekistan and especially Samarkand). In 1992, I was in San Diego (California) when Michael Cole told me that dear Elena had tragically died. Mike and I were deeply shaken.

During one of our dinners I asked Luria what the term *besprizornye* really meant. He told me that they were a kind of homeless children, but that their story was very complex and had not yet been written down. He gave me a copy of the book he had edited in 1930 (*Speech and Intellect in Rural, Urban, and Homeless Child*), a precious gift because the book was very rare. For many years, I thought of studying the *besprizornye* phenomenon, following Luria's suggestion to do so. So,

after much research, in 2019, I finally published my book on the topic. Soon, this book will also be published in Russian, to my great pleasure. In the preface, I recounted how Luria gave me a copy of his precious book with a wistful expression on his face.

Whenever I think back to my encounters with Luria, I cannot help but recall the group of his faithful students, sometimes in the Burdenko laboratory, sometimes at his's house on Frunze Street, especially my friends Janna Markovna Glozman, unfortunately no longer with us, and Tatyana Vasil'evna Akhutina.

And it was a joy to find us all in Florence in 2002, when I organised the International conference on Luria: Janna, Tatyana, Karl Levitin, Lena Moscovitch, Mike Cole, Anne-Lise Christensen, Edoardo Bisiach, Giuseppe Cossu, and many other neuropsychologists whose research was profoundly influenced by the work of the eminent Russian scientist.

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