

PERSONALIA

## In memory of Vitaly Isaevich Kisin

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Vitaly Kisin, science translator, physics PhD, died on April 19, 2014 after a two-year-long battle with cancer.

Vitaly Kisin was born on December 7, 1937 in the city of Tashkent to which his father's family had moved in the 1930s from the Urals. He was the third of four children but his two elder brothers had died before he was born, killed by gastrointestinal infections common back then in Central Asia. This was why his parents, Isaak Albertovich Kisin and Yevgeniya Anatolyevna Ulyaninskaya, decided to leave Tashkent and found jobs as engineers at the Akrikhin factory in Staraya Kupavna, a suburb of Moscow. It was from there that Vitaly's father was drafted to the Winter War with Finland in 1939 and then to World War 2 in 1941. He was reported missing in action in summer 1941 in Yakhroma (*a small town north of Moscow*). After losing her husband, Vitaly's mother rejoined her family in Tashkent, and it was there that, helped by her mother Nina Borisovna Ulyaninskaya, she brought up Vitaly and his younger brother Valery. They lived in poverty. Because the father was listed as missing, his family was not entitled to a pension, and at the age of seven, Vitaly's younger brother was diagnosed with leukaemia, so his mother had to quit her job in order to care for him. The sole breadwinner was the grandmother, a university professor of German — her mother tongue (she grew up in Riga and German was the main language spoken there in the early 20th century). All his life long, Vitaly missed his father, whom he barely remembered, and his brother, who died at the age of 14.

Once out of school, Vitaly enrolled as a student of the Faculty of Physics at the Central Asian State University (currently Tashkent State University). He graduated with excellence and got a job at the faculty. Around that time he became interested in languages; he taught himself English and French, and got part-time jobs with the "Intourist" travel agency as a guide and interpreter in order to practice speaking skills. After a while, he learned simultaneous interpreting and started working as an interpreter at conferences on physics and related sciences.

While still a student, he started listening to the *Voice of America* and the *BBC*: their English-language broadcasts were not jammed back then. After comparing what he heard to the reality, he lost all belief in Soviet dogmas and was close to becoming a dissident (especially at the time of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia). Responsibility for his family was the only thing that kept him from joining the dissident movement.

In 1967, Vitaly was admitted as a PhD student to the Faculty of Physics of Moscow State University, to the Chair



Vitaly Isaevich Kisin  
(07.12.1941 – 19.04.2014)

of Solid State Physics. With Albert Anatolyevich Katsnelson as his supervisor, he defended a PhD thesis on "The Diffraction of X-rays in Almost Ideal Crystals." While studying for his PhD, he published 11 scholarly papers and registered one patent. However, shortly before the defense of his thesis, scheduled for spring 1971, he fell into the hands of the KGB for the first time, when one of his friends, Dmitry Mikheev, made a botched attempt to flee abroad with another man's papers. Vitaly was called as a witness but did not testify against his friend. After his appearance in court, Andrei Sakharov approached him, shook his hand and commended him on his demeanor in the courtroom. The trial was widely publicized and covered in the media. As a result, the defense of Vitaly's PhD thesis was postponed by a year and then for

another year, he could not get a job.<sup>1</sup> His supervisor supported him but was unable to help. It was in 1971 that Vitaly began translating articles and books on physics for a living.

Eventually Vitaly found a job in Moscow, first as a junior researcher at the Institute of Physical Chemistry at the USSR Academy of Sciences, and then as a senior researcher at the Scientific Research Institute of Oil Engineering. However, he was tormented by the constant ideological pressure of the administration. Meanwhile, by the late seventies, his increasingly successful translation work led him to join the Union of Translators affiliated with the Literary Foundation. He left science and fully dedicated himself to translation of books on physics and mathematics and simultaneous translation at scientific conferences. This freelance work allowed him to stay independent from administrations and uninvolved in the “public activism” which was a must in those days.

Vitaly was a workaholic, he never tired of work and loved doing it. Although he quit scientific research, he loved physics all his life, and until his last years, closely followed its discoveries and achievements. He translated over 60 books from Russian into English for publishers including “Mir,” “Nauka,” Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Academic Press, Springer, Gordon and Breach, IOPP, Taylor & Francis, etc. His translations included monographs and science popularizing books by distinguished scholars on physics and mathematics (below please find a possibly incomplete list of the books he translated).

In 1984, in the Andropov days, problems with the KGB started anew, without apparent reasons; they may have been trying to get to one of his friends or colleagues. There was a search at his apartment with confiscation of *samizdat* books and books published abroad, followed by the questioning of Vitaly and his wife at the KGB headquarters at Lubyanka Square, threats, offers of collaboration, pressure on his children: his son was denied admission to a PhD course at the Faculty of Chemistry of Moscow State University, his daughter was expelled from the MSU Faculty of Philology. The Soviet copyright agency stopped giving Vitaly contracts for translations; his fellow translators helped out by signing contracts in their names and then giving him the work and the fee. Just a year later, the agency ‘forgot’ all about it and started contracting him again: the Gorbachev ‘thaw’ was on its way. His daughter was accepted back to the university: a member of the Commission on Juveniles’ Affairs at the Moscow municipality fought hard to help her, and reached out to the Deputy Rector of the MSU. When he said the family was politically unreliable, she insisted that none of the family members had been arrested or sentenced for a crime. In those days, this was sufficient.

Once the borders opened in 1990, Vitaly and his wife went to Bristol on the invitation of the Institute of Physics Publishing (IOPP) for which Vitaly had translated several books. The fees for the last two books were still in the UK and the Kisins decided to spend that money there. The IOPP

offered him an editing job, first for one year and then for another. IOPP kept extending his contract, and the Kisins ended up living in Bristol. Emigration was not all rosy, they made many sacrifices, but as a result, Vitaly lived the last 23 years of his life free of ideology and politics, which for him was a necessity as well as a comfort.

Vitaly worked at the IOPP until his retirement in 2003. Alongside editing jobs, he was also involved at IOPP in another activity he loved: computer systems administration. Vitaly maintained and updated software at the IOPP and taught the staff to use it.

After retiring, he continued doing translations, including for UFN. His cooperation with the UFN on a monthly basis began in 1998 and continued practically to the last days of his life. Altogether he translated over a thousand pages of the magazine, equivalent to about a year’s worth of UFN issues. Apart from monographic reviews on physics and related sciences, Vitaly would often handle articles from the sections that are hardest to translate, such as “Physics News on the Internet,” *Personalia*, “From the History of Physics,” “New Books on Physics and Related Sciences.” While quite short, such articles required understanding and correctly using terminology which is often absolutely unclear given the minimal context, for example, in *Personalia*.

Papers on the history of physics, especially ones on the Atomic Project, required knowledge of Soviet history and everyday life, and a talent and an aspiration to convey all aspects of the Russian text in English with the greatest possible precision. Vitaly was so deep into the history of physics that he often pointed out mistakes made in the Russian originals (and we were able to correct them at least in the English version of UFN, *Physics–Uspekhi*). While translating a paper by G A Goncharov “The 50th anniversary of the beginning of research in the USSR on the potential creation of a nuclear fusion reactor” 44 851–858 (2001), Vitaly thus drew the author’s attention to some drawbacks, which were later corrected in a “Corrigendum” ending with the words: “I am deeply grateful to V I Kisin, whose attentive reading of the paper made it possible to identify and correct these mistakes.”

Vitaly was gravely ill for over two years, had two surgeries, radiation and chemotherapy, but did not lose his capacity to work, his optimism, his love of physics and languages. It was during his illness that he translated a book by L B Okun, *ABC of Physics: A Very Brief Guide*. Until his last days, Vitaly read books on linguistics and followed physics news. In a wheelchair, he attended seminars on physics at Bristol University. Of Vitaly’s six grandchildren, the two eldest are translators.

Vitaly was a real Translator: he did everything to enable English readers to understand what the Russian authors had to say. As testified by reviews<sup>2</sup> of the books he translated, he was good at it. With his departure, there will be less understanding of this kind.

<sup>1</sup> See: The Trial of D Mikheev and F De Perrego: “KISIN refused to answer the question: what books did MIKHEEV give him? (On 3 March 1971 KISIN was scheduled to defend his dissertation but the defense was cancelled and the notice was withdrawn from the *Vechernyaya Moskva* daily, because the body in charge of the defense received the information that KISIN ‘was insincere in his testimony in the case of MIKHEEV,’” <http://www.memo.ru/history/diss/chr/chr21.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> A review of the English translation of a book by Nobel Prize winner V L Ginzburg contains the following paragraph: “The short description of each area is written in lucid, matter of fact prose, which is also a compliment to the (unnamed) translators.” (*Nature* 412 12 July 2001, p. 121–122). Such a compliment is worth a lot.

## BOOKS TRANSLATED BY VITALY KISIN (1974–2012)

### Physics

#### Physics monographs

1. (1987) A Krupchitsky *Fundamental Research with Polarized Neutrons* (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag)
2. (1981, 1986) Yu N Novozhilov & Yu A Yappa *Electrodynamics* (Moscow: Mir)
3. (1983) N V Perelomova & M M Tagieva *Problems in Crystal Physics, with Solutions* (Moscow: Mir)
4. (1982, 1984) L B Okun *Leptons and Quarks* (Amsterdam: North Holland)
5. (1986) G M Zaslavsky *Chaos in Dynamic Systems* (New York: Cordon & Breach)
6. (1987) V A Nesterenko & O V Kvitko *Physical Properties of Atomically Clean Semiconductor Surfaces* (Moscow: Nauka)
7. (1989) E I Zababakhin & I E Zababakhin *Unlimited Cumulation Phenomena* (Moscow: Nauka)
8. (1990) Yu P Raizer *Physics of Gas Discharge* (Heidelberg: Springer)
9. (1992) V G Soloviev *Theory of Atomic Nuclei: Quasiparticles and phonons* (Bristol: Adam Hilger) (to be published)
10. (1993) M V Nezlin *Physics of Intense Beams in Plasmas* (Bristol, Institute of Physics Publishing)
11. (1994) Yu A Ill'insky & L V Keldysh *Electromagnetic Response of Material Media* (New York, Plenum Press)
12. (1995) S V Popov, Yu P Svirko & N I Zheludev *Susceptibility Tensors for Nonlinear Optics* (Bristol, Institute of Physics Publishing)
13. (1998) V P Frolov and I D Novikov *Physics of Black Holes* (Dordrecht, Kluwer)
14. (2000) S S Moiseev, V G Pungin & V N Oraevsky *Nonlinear Instabilities in Plasmas and Hydrodynamics* (Bristol, Institute of Physics Publishing)
15. (2004) O V Minin, I V Minin *Diffractive Optics of Millimetre Waves* (IOP, Bristol)
16. (2005) *The Physics of the Cosmic Microwave Background* by P.D. Naselsky, D. I. Novikov, I. D. Novikov (CUP), August 2006
17. (2012) L B Okun *ABC of Physics: A very brief guide* (World Scientific, London)

#### Atomic Physics and Technology

18. (2009) A.A. Mayorshin *Fuel Elements with Vibration Compacted Oxide Fuel*, Research Institute of Nuclear Reactors, Dimitrograd, 2009, 159 pp.
19. (2010) E.R. Nazin and G.M. Zachinyaev *Fire and Explosion Safety of Operating Procedures in Radiochemical Production*, Scientific and Technical Centre for Nuclear and Radiation Safety (Moscow, 2010) pp. 189 (proofread)

#### Popular physics and astrophysics

20. (1976) Ya A Smorodinsky *Particles, Quanta, Waves* (Moscow: Mir)
21. (1976, 1982) S E Frish *Problems of Wave Optics* (Moscow: Mir)
22. (1982) M I Kaganov & I M Lifshits *Quasiparticles* (Moscow: Mir)
23. (1981, 1984) L V Tarasov *Laser Age in Optics* (Moscow: Mir)
24. (1981) M I Kaganov *Electrons, Phonons, Magnons* (Moscow: Mir)
25. (1984, 1988) Ya A Smorodinsky *Temperature* (Moscow: Mir)
26. (1985) L B Okun *Particle Physics: The Quest for the Substance of Substance* (New York: Harwood/Cordon & Breach)
27. (1985) M I Kaganov & V M Tsukernik *The Nature of Magnetism* (Moscow: Mir)
28. (1986) L B Okun  *$\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ ,  $\gamma$ , . . . ,  $Z$ : Elementary introduction to Elementary Particles* (New York: Harwood/Gordon & Breach)
29. (1986) A L Efros *Physics and Geometry of Disorder* (Moscow: Mir)
30. (1988) Ed. I Yu Kobzarev *Seven Journeys to the World of Particles* (Moscow: Nauka)
31. (1989) Ed. A M Cherepashchuk *The Past and the Future of the Universe* (Moscow: Nauka)
32. (1990) I D Novikov *Black Holes and the Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
33. (1993) I D Novikov *Edwin Hubble: The Discovery of Exploding Universe: The Life and Work of Edwin Hubble* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press)
34. (1998) I D Novikov *The River of Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press)

35. (2001) V L Ginzburg *The Physics of a Lifetime: Recollections on the Problems and Personalities of 20th Century Physics* (Springer). Translation of pages 259–362
36. (2004) V L Ginzburg *About Science, Myself and Others* (Institute of Physics/ Taylor&Francis) Translation of pages 368–388; 425-461
37. (2005) Naselsky, Novikov & Novikov *Cosmic Microwave Background in the Universe* (Cambridge Univ. Press) 2006

#### Physical Chemistry

38. (1983) V S Bagotsky & A M Skundin *Chemical Power Sources* (London: Academic Press)
39. (1985) Ed. E I Givargizov & A A Chernov *Growth of Crystals* Vol. 13 (New York: Plenum)
40. (1987) B V Derjaguin et al. *Surface Forces* (London: Plenum)
41. (1986) L F Vereshchagin *Synthetic Diamonds. Collected papers* (Moscow: Nauka)
42. (1987) Ed. I M Makarov *Cybernetics of Living Matter* (Moscow: Mir)
43. (1992) G A Martynov *Fundamental Theory of Liquids* (Bristol, Institute of Physics Publishing)
44. (1997) G A Martynov *Classical Statistical Mechanics* (Dordrecht, Kluwer)

#### Mathematics

##### Math monographs

45. (1980) V M Starzhinsky *Applied Methods in the Theory of Nonlinear Oscillations* (Moscow: Mir)
46. (1982) L I Sedov *Similarity and Dimensional Methods in Mechanics* (Moscow: Mir)
47. (1979, 1983) Ed. A Darkov *Structural Mechanics* (Moscow: Mir)
48. (1985) O P Kuznetsov & G M Adel'son-Vel'sky *Discrete Mathematics for Engineers* (New York: Gordon & Breach)

##### Popular Math

49. (1975) I M Sobol *The Monte Carlo Method* (Moscow: Mir)
50. (1976, 1982) G E Shilov *Calculus of Rational Functions* (Moscow: Mir)
51. (1976, 1979) V A Uspensky *Pascal's Triangle* (Moscow: Mir)
52. (1976, 1982) A S Smogorzhevsky *Lobachevskian Geometry* (Moscow: Mir)
53. (1977, 1986) V A Rosenfeld *Stereographic Projection* (Moscow: Mir)
54. (1982) L V Tarasov *Calculus: Basic Concepts* (Moscow: Mir)
55. (1976) A Kurosh *Algebraic Equations of Arbitrary Degrees* (Moscow: Mir)
56. (1986) *The Fascinating Fractions* (Moscow: Mir)