



## Memorabilia

### A.K. Skvortsov as a Mentor

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I remember my first encounter with Alexei Konstantinovich Skvortsov as an author. At the time, I was a student of the Ural State University in Yekaterinburg (then Sverdlovsk). I ran into his article on *Epilobium* in *News in Higher Plant Systematics (Novosti Sistemiki Vysshikh Rastenii)* and enjoyed reading it very much. In that article, A.K. Skvortsov very articulately and consistently demonstrated the invalid status of one of the described species. I was especially impressed by the final statement in the article, which sounded much like a court sentence: “Therefore, the circuit of facts and evidence is closed.” Next was my acquaintance with the book by Alexei Konstantinovich “*Willows of the USSR*,” the one that received the V.L. Komarov Award.

Upon graduating in 1973, following a romantic drive, chasing “fog and taiga scent,” I favored the newly organized Institute of Biological Problems of the North in Magadan over the Komarov Botanical Institute in Leningrad, where I could become a doctoral student on the condition of returning to the Ural University upon defending my thesis. Instead I decided to become a distance student of Alexey Konstantinovich in the Main Botanic Garden. Having passed the entrance exams, I ended up there—together with two other young women from central Russia. I managed to visit the Main Botanic Garden a few times a year. I then could watch AK at work and see how extremely busy he was dealing with a constant, never-ending stream of visitors and phone calls. He was a Deputy Head Editor of the *Priroda (Nature)* Magazine at the time. Phone calls came from the *Priroda* editorial office, Higher Attestation Commission, other organizations. It was only after working hours or even on his way home in the underground that we finally had a chance to talk. Most conversations occurred through correspondence. At home I carefully preserve a special folder entitled “A.K. Skvortsov, Correspondence” full of his letters, greeting cards, detailed notes on my own dissertation as well as his reviews of my PhD students’ theses, all written despite his extremely tight schedule. Produced in calligraphic handwriting, punctuated by his soft humor, these are testimony to his

refinement and wit. He never categorically dictated his opinion to his students, never pushed anyone, letting a person find own solutions to problems, though at the same time delicately taught the ABC of the systematics, the culture of dealing with the traditions accepted in the field.

I believe it would be appropriate to publish some excerpts from this correspondence in the first issue of the journal named in his honor.

*1.XII.1974*

*Alexandra Naumovna,*

*Due to my workload, your letter has been waiting somewhat too long. Your article is nearly ready for publication. Yet there is something to work on. I believe statistical treatments are useful for intraspecific systematics rather than at the species level. Species have to be separated by a gap in the sequence of variable characters.*

*On the synonymy. At the very start of work, the synonymy is of interest merely for initial orientation in the literature: who was saying what about the plant, who took it for what species, etc. In other words, a listing of synonyms circumscribes literature pertaining to your subject. As to clarification and configuring your own attitude toward the name and synonyms, this must be postponed until the final stage of your work, until after the study of the plants. One should never ever make hasty categorical statements on what is synonymous to what.*

*Now about a report at the Congress. I believe this is completely unnecessary (and I haven't submitted any). What's interesting is an opportunity to see people, talk to them. As to reports, there are going to be a legion, so that any single one will be drowned in this mass anyway.*

*25.II.1975.*

*Dear Alexandra Naumovna,*

*Due to the hustle-bustle in the Garden I could not answer right away. I am writing from Leningrad, to where I managed to retreat until about March 8. Your report is quite acceptable. You will have to deliver it formally in March. If you cannot attend, this is of course not a big deal. More important is to move ahead with the actual work.*

*I'd like to answer briefly to your detailed letter. Of course the limits and sizes of genera in Cruciferae are still far from "patched up." Usually, the more uniform and natural the family is, the more challenging is delimitation of the genera (compare, for example, Umbelliferae family or subfamily Cichorioideae, and so on). As to statements on affinity of species, one has to be very careful. It is hardly possible to say anything, unless you are familiar with the entire group of "relations," all of close species. Often, you think you already know the ancestor as well as the closest descendant, and then all of a sudden find out these are not even remotely related and truly close relatives of either of the two are somewhere on another continent. One has to watch out and then watch out again. It is not immediately obvious which characters are of importance and which aren't, where the limits of variability are, etc. By all means, you have to put in work on the material in Komarov Institute. You cannot even compare their holdings with ours in Moscow.*

*Species' close affiliation is of course revealed through the morphology study (you can certainly use chemical methods instead, but this does not provide any significant advantages and at the same time is extremely complicated and time consuming). Yet the trick is to realistically assess morphological characters, as their values are greatly unequal and any readily available standards are impossible. In any concrete situation, the importance of certain characters becomes obvious only in the process of study. Apparently, first of all you have to exclude purely phenotypical variability; then to approximately set up the frame of intraspecific genotypic variability (for both these tasks you have to observe attentively as many plants as possible in the field and herbarium). Upon that, you can turn to species comparison with confidence.*

28.X. 1975

*You'd better get in touch with Rollings. The best way would be by sending him Cruciferae family plant samples—either as a gift or in exchange. If you have difficulty doing it from Magadan, let's send them from us here. As to your affiliation, I will discuss it with our management and write more later.*

The next letter, sparkling with AK's humor and wit, is especially memorable to me.

A friend of mine once confessed to me that her supervisor was angry with her when he found out she had got married. From his perspective, that was it with her career in science.

Meanwhile, she produced her child as well as two dissertations and is now successfully leading an entire botanical school of her own.

22.II.1977

*Sasha,*

*Congratulations on the arrival of your baby boy! This is quite an accomplishment—not as simple as some obscure **Draba**. Wishing you and your Son all the best!*

8.I. 1977

*Sasha!*

*You are quite right when noticing that ascribing **T. humilis** to the genus **Torularia** is way too formal. As for me, I am always suspicious toward all speculations on introgression, hybridogenic species, and such. I am positive that in 90% of cases this is pure fantasy. Good for you, if you finally place this species properly.*

A.K. Skvortsov never received the honorary title ‘academician,’ but for all those who knew him or are familiar with the scientific heritage he left, he is a true academician.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Irina Kadis for the translation of the Russian version of these reminiscences .