

A Dialogue about Alexander Luria¹

Michael Cole, Jerome Bruner, and Oliver Sacks

Bruner: One of the first conversations I ever had with Luria² was right there, on Red Square, when he was talking about the... when he and his group first put forth a proposal that went to—the minister of education it was or the minister of science, I can't remember which,—for a grant, which was the start of what he described as the battle for consciousness or the battle of consciousness—I don't know which way to put it—and I was fascinated by it. So it was that we didn't know, for example, whether the next day we would get letters acknowledging the draft or whether they were gonna take us off and throw it out, and that kind of thing. And it was so difficult, but then... this was at the meeting in Moscow—I think it was the first time—and then after that we started corresponding a great deal. I was corresponding a lot, and I realized that he,—we'd talk about anything in the correspondence,—but I realized that one of the things that he was telling me about was a battle for consciousness in Russia, the parallel of which was starting in the United States in the Center for Cognitive Studies, which had yet get... got starting. But we were somehow wanting to get back to a notion of mind³. We... hm... this case being George A. Miller... I don't think George and Luria knew each other particularly well or got on.

¹ *Editor's comment:* The conversation between Michael Cole (interviewer), Jerome Bruner, and Oliver Sacks (both—interviewees) took place around 2002 in New York apartment of Bruner. The meeting was video recorded. The interview was taken within the framework of a larger project that comprised a series of “oral histories” about Alexander Luria, his life and scientific legacy and was subsequently published on a DVD disc along with recordings of the interviews with Russian and international scholars, who personally knew Luria and share their reminiscences of him. Along with Michael Cole's introduction of 2004 and his interview with Bruner and Sacks, the disc presents four interviews by the late Karl Levitin that he took with Jagannath P. Das, Peeter Tulviste (both interviews were taken in Amsterdam on the occasion of the Fifth ISCRAT Congress, June 18-22, 2002), Vladimir Zinchenko, Vladimir Lubovskii (both in Moscow; for additional details on the book and the disc see, for instance, book review by Clifford Morris, “Remembering the Father of Neuropsychology” online at [http://www.igs.net/~cmorris/review_the_making_of_mind.htm]). The disc can be acquired as a supplement to the new release of Alexander Luria's memoirs co-edited by Michael Cole (San-Diego) and Karl Levitin (Moscow) (Cole & Levitin, 2006). The interview with Jerome Bruner and Oliver Sacks was transcribed by Michael Munipov and Tatyana Zhdanova. Michael Cole was kind enough to iteratively proof-read and pedantically correct the English manuscript of the interview transcription. Gisele Toassa and Thales Cavalcanti volunteered to translate this dialogue into Portuguese. Russian translation was done by Elena Rusakova. At a later time the editorial team of PsyAnima, Journal of Psychology, with generous support of Michael Cole, is planning to prepare for publication in print the rest of these interviews, as well. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all those involved in this transnational project at all stages.—A. Yasnitsky.

² *Editor's comment:* For a history of Bruner's communications and friendship with Luria see also the book of his memoirs “In search of mind. Essays in autobiography.” For instance: “As I drew away from Geneva [*i.e.*, the intellectual heritage of Jean Piaget—AY], I drew closer to Moscow. It was partly intellectual, partly personal. The personal part was Alexander Romanovich Luria, a Russian uncle in the grand manner. It was with him that I could talk and correspond about Vygotsky's ideas and my [p. 144] variants of them. Luria had unflagging energy, intense loyalties, unquenchable enthusiasm. In the fifteen or so years that I knew him well, I do not think that two months ever went by without a letter from him, a new book of translation of his, a coffee-table volume of Rublov's icons or the architecture of the cathedral at Rostov, whatever. He was the czar of Russian psychology, but a more benign czar would be hard to imagine!” (Bruner, 1983, pp. 143–144)—A. Yasnitsky.

³ *Editor's comment:* On the intellectual context and the original goals of the founder of ‘cognitive studies’ and ‘cognitive science’ see (Bruner, 1990)—A. Yasnitsky.

But I think Luria also sensed that we were up to that, so that a lot, a lot of our first conversation was about the business of freeing psychology from this sort of mechanism. As I think about it in retrospect, I realize that, to some extent, the two of us—each in our own way—were responding to something interestingly common in the world. He was responding to the Communist ideology of man as kind of somebody who was a robot, to get something back into the robot that somehow could fit into a system. I and my... and my pals, including you [i.e. Michael Cole] as a young guy, were responding to a kind of capitalist Taylorism in the world-making man fit into slots that was to put the fit into the industrial system. And each of us in our way were communicating about that⁴.

And it was interesting—the extent to which in our contacts, whether I was visiting with him in Moscow, or the rest of it, it tended—it tended to be not just about psychology, but about the symbolic world. We both shared a certain amount of interest in art, film, theater and that kind of thing. And his... his interest in Stanislavsky—and the rest of it, like in the method—made me fully aware of two things about him, which I thought were absolutely fascinating. One of them was the role of symbolic processes, and the role not only of symbolic processes as we would now say, years later, of “going meta” on your own thoughts and making a symbol of it. He thought of that as the arts and the way... the way in which somehow you create objects of art with plays or theater, and so on. The way, for example, in the “Alexander Nevsky” film, for example, you have the hordes coming across the ice of the lake or in the “Potemkin” film⁵ you have people coming down the long stairway—and that kind of thing, representing a symbol—people rising against that. And the rising was based on consciousness along the way, and so on.

So there was that element—and there was the other... the other element that was in it and that was a very-very strong one—was a notion somehow of individuation. And this was the business, part of the business of “going meta”. That is to say: you are the master of “going meta” on your

⁴ *Editor's comment:* It is remarkable how the themes of the intellectual rebellion against Pavlov-Skinner behaviourism and the interpersonal relations between Bruner and Sacks surfaced in the same segment of a long video interview that Oliver Sacks gave for the Internet portal ‘Web of stories’ [<http://www.webofstories.com/>]: “Jerry Bruner was, and is, a legendary figure, because in the 1950s he was one of the founders of the... what is usually called the cognitive revolution. At that time, behaviourism and BF Skinner and conditioned reflexes were all the rage. One looked at stimulus and response. There was no reference to the inside of an organism. There was no concept of organisms having an inside. It’s really bizarre how something so counterintuitive could have... could have had such power. One of the great early critics of BF Skinner was Chomsky, and beside Chomsky’s first book on syntactic structures, he wrote an... an annihilating review of Skinner and Skinner’s work, and that whole orientation – very audacious, not to say *chutzpadik*, thing for a young man to do. Kick... kicking the god on his pedestal. And at the same time, Jerry Bruner and his colleagues were looking at mind. The word mind did not exist for Pavlov and BF Skinner. I think at that time Jerry was in Cambridge. His life on the whole was spent – well, what one would have called his life had he died at a normal age – would have been spent between Cambridge and Harvard. But at, I don’t know, but at 95 plus, Jerry is still going strong. I first encountered him because he wrote a wonderful, generous review of *A Leg to Stand On*. And that gave me a leg to stand on. It hugely encouraged me. It enabled me to go on when I had been hamstrung by a hateful review of the book in England. Jerry and I became friends. The generational difference between us didn’t seem to matter that much, and now I’m approaching 80, it... it matters even less.” See this episode of the interview online at <http://www.webofstories.com/play/54457> —A. *Yasnitsky*.

⁵ *Editor's comment:* Bruner mentions two films, “Alexander Nevsky” (1938) and “Battleship *Potemkin*” (1925), produced by world known Soviet movie director and art theorist and Luria’s associate and close friend Sergei M. Eisenstein. On the interrelations between Luria and Eisenstein see, e.g., (E. A. Luria, 1994), also (Bulgakowa, 2001)—A. *Yasnitsky*.

own thoughts. And it was for this, I think, that he loved the frontal lobe work, as it was the frontal lobe that provided the basis for doing this. And when... when, for example, we first time were working with children in Cambridge, we were... I have to say, we were corresponding at a hell of a rate. I was amazed—I haven't gone back over them yet—but I was amazed that the gal who was up in Cambridge had found a hundred letters. I had no idea there were that many back-and-forthing. He was... he was strong on the business of being aware of the fact that what it took to use the old Vygotskian zone of proximal development was a... sort of... not only that there'd be an abstract kind of thing, but that there was an act involved. He was very much an actor. There was an act of turning around on your own knowledge and making it into—how to put it—the next stage.

But that was... was that part. And that with the one last thing that I wanted to say: during the period, ... during the period when we hooked—in the midst of correspondence—he was very much a sort of ... kind of a..., well, kind of a father figure. He was... sort of a perfect father figure, in a way, for me. I think you might know something about that, too. But he was accessible, warm. He was kind of the Jewish intellectual father... I was the son. And he was looking... he was looking for figures of that sort⁶.

But during that same period,... it was interesting, because I was also corresponding, not as much and not as personally at all, with Piaget and with Sir Frederick Bartlett, and I realize that to some extent now, it was the odd kind of a thing—about their looking... their looking for some sort of a break in the overall sort of behaviorist facade of American psychology, and they were finding even people like me and Don Hebb, who was among the ones with whom I have been in correspondence, and Karl Pribram a bit later.

But I've always thought of that as an interesting kind of thing, in which two things—and I'll come to one a little bit later, while I dispense of it—two things distinguished Luria from... certainly, if I not take Piaget as an example (Piaget was rather threatened by Luria),—none of them was the sense of the cultural thing.

One thing that Alexander Romanovich never believed in was the kind of invariant growth of mind without respect to culture—the kind of Piagetian stages. He... he... he didn't scorn it. He just laughed. He said it must be awfully comfortable for people to have a pointview like that. So there was that. That was one of the kinds of things that... he didn't like that. And the other thing... the other thing that he... he...—particular with..., funny on the subject of Piaget, was the fact that there was no way in which the child ever seen free to reflect in a way, which was *au-delà*⁷, so to speak,—“reflection” was the term that he liked—do you remember? But it was

⁶ *Editor's comment:* Compare this with a paragraph from Bruner's autobiographic book: “Luria and I became fast friends almost immediately. We were compatible temperamentally and very much in agreement about psychological matters. His curiosity ran along much more psychological lines than did Piaget's and his interest in the cultural enablement of mind led him to be far more open to links between anthropology and psychology. Besides, he created none of those father-son problems that had dogged my relations with Piaget” (Bruner, 1983, p. 145). On Luria's cross-cultural research that links anthropology and psychology see forthcoming thematic special issue of *PsyAnima*, *Journal of Psychology* tentatively titled “Kurt Koffka: ‘Uzbeks DO HAVE illusions!’ Discussing Koffka-Luria controversy” (papers by Ilya Ponomarev, Hannah Proctor, Anton Yasnitsky, Oleg Goncharov, Vladimir Spiridonov, Eli Lamdan, and Jüri Allik)—A. Yasnitsky.

⁷ *French.*: beyond.

what we now call “going meta”. He liked Bartlett for his thing like that. But suppose... I don’t think he and Bartlett... did they ever meet?

Cole: I doubt it.

Bruner: I doubt it very much, and if they did, it would be hard to imagine the two of them in conversation... A prototypical Brit⁸?

Cole: Let me ask you a question. Because one of the... the first published pieces that appears,... that commented on the general ideas was the preface to Vygotsky’s “Thought and Language”, which was published in 19...1962⁹. How did that come about? How did it come about that you wrote that preface..., and was this Luria arranging things?

Bruner: Well, there was Luria arranging things, but I also have to mention the fact that there was somebody who acted as a mediator in that...who was...what was her name, again?

Cole: Evgenia Hanfmann?

Bruner: Evgenia. Eugenia Hanfmann. There had, apparently, been some... and Roman Jacobson as well... Apparently, there was some funny kind of a business as to who was going to write the introduction and was in not, or of the preface whatever, ...was it not at one point the case that Luria was going to write a commentary?

Sacks: Not Luria, maybe Piaget?

Bruner: Piaget was going to write it.

Cole: It was a Piaget commentary.

Bruner: It was a Piaget commentary. And, I mean, it was a slip in. It was to be part of the book and it was to be everything like that.

Apparently, as I remember, Roman Jacobson read the thing, and the fullness of his Russian-ness, if I can put it that way, went into a very stagey Russian rage. I love... Russian rage is a wonderful... it’s one of the things why Russian theater is great. It’s a cultural form. I am sure that Roman was completely enthralled in that sense, and... how could you...you got a major, major work that Vygotsky wrote and ask somebody who holds a completely different view to write an evaluation. And then put it in as a bla-bla-bla, bla-bla-bla, you know... So it was a bad staging, again, that... I don’t know how it came about that they asked me to do the thing at this point. Could there...could have been Eugenia’s idea...or it may well have been that Alexander Romanovich said “Why don’t you get Bruner to do it?” Do you know any more than that?

Cole: No, no, I am just curious...

⁸ *Editor’s comment:* “prototypical Brit”— this is a reference to British scholar Sir Frederick Charles Bartlett (professor at the University of Cambridge and the Fellow of the Royal Society)—A. Yasnitsky.

⁹ (Vygotsky, 1962).

Bruner: I don't.

Cole: Just curious... I got to turn to Oliver and would love to come back, may be to get a little dialogue going... The earliest correspondence that we have, I think, between Jerry and Alexander Romanovich was from 1958, believe us.

Sacks: Was it from '58?

Cole: I think it was from '58. May be '56. But '58, certainly, about that period. And your correspondence with him began in quite a different way, ...your interaction...

Sacks: I'd... I'd... I'd been fascinated by him for years, especially by "The Mind of a Mnemonist" which came out in '68 in English¹⁰. But then when "The Man with a Shattered World" came out in '73, I think, late '72¹¹, I wrote a review of it, which also became an... an essay on... on Luria¹². And this was published in... in June of '73, which was the same month as my book "Awakenings" came out¹³. And then the following month I got... I got one of these wonderful envelopes from Moscow with... with beautiful, beautiful stamps, and...

Bruner: He was a great stamp collector.



Illustration. From Luria's correspondence with Oliver Sacks

(Source: archival photo collection of Michael Cole)¹⁴.

¹⁰ (A. R. Luria, 1968).

¹¹ (A. R. Luria, 1972).

¹² (Sacks, 1973b).

¹³ (Sacks, 1973a).

¹⁴ *Editor's comment:* For other documents, publications, and archival resources see *The Alexander Romanovich Luria Site* at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, University of California, San Diego: [<http://luria.ucsd.edu/>]. This online project could hardly be possible without initiative and most energetic support from Dr. Michael Cole, to whom we would like to express our gratitude for all his effort and contribution to the worldwide dissemination of the Lurian scholarship—A. Yasnitsky.

Sacks: ...and Luria's handwriting. I was very excited. It was like... like getting a letter from Freud. And he sent ...he sent me first a very long letter in response to my essay, which... which really spoke of many-many aspects in his own life, and how separate he felt from both the Pavlov and Skinner and... and from mechanical thinking. How... how important for him it was to see things in terms of social development. So that there was never just an autonomous child, there was always a mother and child, there was always a dialogue. And,... well, he spoke of many-many things including his... including the way in which Pavlov responded to Luria's own first book "The Nature of Human Conflicts"¹⁵, when... when... when Pavlov refused to read it and said "You call yourself a scientist?!"

It was a wonderful open letter. And then a week after that I got another letter about "Awakenings". And so this was the start of a correspondence which went on till Luria's death in '77. But I... I never met him. I... I don't know what inhibited me from going to Moscow, but the... the correspondence then ramified in different directions. At... early on, he hoped one might re-publish in English some of the classics on Russian neuropsychology—Sechenov and... and some works by his own father R.A. Luria.

In 1974, when I had my... my strange leg accident and the feeling of alienation of the leg, I wrote at length¹⁶. I found this unintelligible, and I couldn't communicate with anyone except to Luria. And I wrote him then, and there was a lot of correspondence about this, and he ... - which especially had to do with the nature of action and body image, and how something could be excluded from body image or alienated if it wasn't active. And I... I wondered whether I should write about this or not. And he finally got so... so enthusiastic he sent me a telegram from Moscow saying "Do it!" And you can quote my letters if you want to. In '75, I started seeing a patient with Tourette syndrome. And I sent Luria some tapes of this, some audio tapes. And he was fascinated—he thought there were some similarities between the mental processes of the... of the Tourette and his mnemonist. He partly saw it as mnemonism in action.

In... Duncan Dallas, a filmmaker, hoped to make three documentaries. One — with Luria, one — with Skinner, and one — with me. He made the documentaries with Skinner and with myself¹⁷. But by that time Luria was... was feeling too... too ill, I think, to contribute. Occasionally, completely different things would come out in the letters. One of them was his fondness for detective stories. And I... I sent him a number of those.

¹⁵ (A. R. Luria, 1932).

¹⁶ See, e.g., (Sacks, 1984).

¹⁷ *Editor's comment*. This is how Sacks describes this episode elsewhere: "In... October of '73, I was approached by Duncan Dallas of Yorkshire Television and... who wondered whether... how I would feel – and how the patients might feel – about a documentary being made, and said he would like to come over and meet the patients. And he came over for 10 days and met many of the patients who warmed to him. And I warmed to him not just as a potential film-maker, but I was delighted to learn that he had written a doctoral thesis on [Antoine] Lavoisier and that he was in fact a chemist manqué, and had a laboratory of his own. So when we weren't talking about Awakenings we were talking about chemistry and the history of chemistry." See video interview at: <http://www.webofstories.com/play/54203>. The documentary turned out fairly successful: "So Duncan came again, this time with his film crew, and in 10 days the documentary was made and it was shown in England in January of '74. And people liked it a lot, and I liked it, and, most importantly, the patients liked it. A very different matter from what was to happen with a subsequent documentary which Duncan made" (see: <http://www.webofstories.com/play/54205>). The success of this documentary subsequently lead to several dramatic adaptations of Sacks' book "Awakenings", including Harold Pinter's play, "A Kind of Alaska," and the feature film, "Awakenings," starring Robert De Niro and Robin Williams—A. Yasnitsky.

Bruner: He was a terrific admirer of American detective stories.

Sacks: I think the one that he liked most was the Sherlock Holmes one, “The Seven-Per-Cent Solution”, which imagined Sherlock Holmes as a cocaine addict being...being analyzed by Freud. Luria loved that.

Bruner: I sent him all of my Ngaio Marsh books.

Sacks: Yes, he especially asked, I think, for Nicolas Freeling books from me.

Cole: To what extent... you are one of the few people who write about Luria and his notion on romantic science. And I'm curious about the sort of initiation of the causal factors of the relationship between your ideas on those topics and his.

Sacks: Well, the early Luria I read was very different. I think, the first Luria I read, was “The...”—probably in the late 50's—was “The Nature of Human Conflicts”. And in particular, the way in which someone with Parkinsonism, who... who could not take a step by himself, could organize movement by using the higher cortical mechanism. And since I had seen this constantly among my own patients... but this was the first consideration I'd seen. And then I... in the mid 60's, “Higher Cortical Functions” was published¹⁸, and, somehow, the...the stultifying sort of phrenological neurology, which...in which I had been taught, could be replaced by this wonderful notion of functional systems with... with different components. And that seemed to me very, very exciting¹⁹. But then an entirely different sort of excitement came in when I saw “The Mind of a Mnemonist”. I... I read the first 30 pages thinking it was a novel. And then I realized that it wasn't a novel, but a wonderful case history with all the accuracy of science, but all the sensibility and drama and structure of a novel. And I think I'm sort of a story-teller myself, or, rather, I have a story-telling impulse, which sometimes seems to compete with the analytical impulse. And... but certainly seeing “The Mind of a Mnemonist”, I think, made me... fortified me in my own feeling that I had to attempt some similar sort of portraits of my own patients, which is... which is what I... I did in “Awakenings”²⁰. And I... I love Victorian case

¹⁸ (A. R. Luria, 1966).

¹⁹ *Editor's comment.* Here is a somewhat curious autobiographic account of Sacks' first encounters with Luria's work back in 1950s and 1960s: “Luria came to London in '58 and gave some talks about a pair of identical twins and their speech development, and... and this combined observational science, theoretical depth, and human warmth in a way which I thought marvellous. When I came to New York I was to read two just published books of Luria, his ‘Higher Cortical Functions[in Man]’, and one called... the title has escaped me. Well, and another book full of histories of frontal patients with frontal lobe damage, which very much upset me – this may be the reason why I can't think of the title – it upset me because, as I read this book I thought: there's no place for me in the world. I thought: Luria has already written it, he had already seen, said, written and thought anything I can ever say, or write, or think, and in my anger I tore the book in two. It was called ‘The Human Brain and Psychological Process’. I told the library that something had happened to the book and I got a new copy as well as a copy for myself.” (See: <http://www.webofstories.com/play/54219>)—A. Yasnitsky.

²⁰ *Editor's comment.* A complementary version of this episode: “In 1968, a book of Luria's came out called The Mind of a Mnemonist. I read the first 30 pages of this thinking it was a novel, a rather Turgenev-like novel. I'm particularly fond of Turgenev because of the richness of detail, and then I realised that it was a case history, but the most detailed and deep case history I'd ever read, but a case history with all the dramatic power and the pathos and the feeling of a novel. It seemed to me perfect of its kind, and it, on the one hand, and Auden, on the other hand, allowed me to give Awakenings the shape it had. I... I think I could not have written Awakenings without the exemplar of Luria and the... and encouragement of Auden who said, ‘You must... you must broaden, you must use a

histories and their... their richness of detail and their insight, and their... you know, ... their human character. And I had been feeling that neurology was becoming very desiccated. And in... in Luria's romantic case histories, I had the feeling that the richness of 19th century naturalism was recovered along with the sort of functional analysis, which... which was completely new, and which could take everything to... to a higher level. So I was... I was thrilled by this²¹.

much larger palette and one of which some of your scientific colleagues may disapprove”); see: <http://www.webofstories.com/play/54220> —A. Yasnitsky.

²¹ *Editor's comment:* In his *Web of stories* interview Sacks further discusses his appreciation of Victorian case histories: “In general, my favourite reading in neurology and psychiatry are... are 19th century case histories. They have a detail and a richness, and a warmth, and... and a personality, which I think one very rarely finds in... in a case history now. The... in fact, I think, there was good reason to think until some resurrection of the case history around 1990 that case history was dead, and that the journals – Brain Neurology – which had once been full of wonderful case histories, were now full of... of essentially statistical or research articles with... with very little human interest. But there was one contemporary who was different, perhaps contemporary is the wrong word because he was, I guess, 30 years my senior, and this was the Soviet neuropsychologist, AR Luria” (see <http://www.webofstories.com/play/54218>). And further: “I think I'd been interested in neurology, what is now called neuroscience – although the word didn't exist then – probably since... since I was a teenager, but meeting patients in detail was very exciting to me with one patient who had jerky movements, synchronous with flashing lights. She... and actually a sister of hers told me this had been in the family for five generations. And I went to Ohio and I looked up church records and gravestones. And I... and I liked... this was one of the things which was included in my ill-fated myoclonus book. At that time, however – already at that time – I think, the case history was supreme for me. And, although, I was not sure what form it should take, I remember back in '64 I saw a man with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, or Jakob-Creutzfeldt, with a terrible rapid dementia. This was long before the incidence of mad cow disease and juvenile CJ and I wrote two case histories about him, one, full of medical jargon and the other rather like a short story. And I somehow felt that the proper case history would come somewhere in between, that it should be full of authentic detail but that it should have all the drama and emotion of a short story or a novella” (see <http://www.webofstories.com/play/54175>). In one of his earlier writings, Oliver Sacks, following Luria, discussed Luria's—and, for that matter, his—way of doing “Romantic Science” as opposed to “classical science” (Sacks, 1990). This earlier relatively rare paper is scheduled to be republished in the forthcoming ‘The Cambridge Handbook of Cultural-Historical Psychology’ (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, & Ferrari, in press) —A. Yasnitsky.

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