

Another reminiscence of Boris Valerianovich Chirikov from Peter Koch (6 June 2008)

I am sad that Boris Valerianovich is no longer with us, but as long as I live I will be happy to have known him. Many of the pictures on this web site show the twinkle in his eyes that accompanied his frequent smile. Together these quietly announced his impish sense of humor, quietly that is until his wonderful laugh came forth.

I will add only one anecdote to the remarks I made in the after-dinner speech in Toulouse in 1998 on the occasion of the scientific celebration of Boris's 70th birthday. (It is posted elsewhere on this web site.) What I describe now occurred ten years earlier during the International Conference on Classical Dynamics in Atomic and Molecular Physics, which was held during 30 August – 2 September on the island of Brioni, off the coast of Croatia.

This is a beautiful island that Tito had made his exclusive State Summer Residence after World War II. It remained so until after his death, but in 1983 it was made a National Park. That is how we scientists, many with our families, came to be there for a conference in 1988. My wife and our young children Amanda and Nathan were with me, and my longtime theoretical collaborator Derek Richards was there with his wife Helen, and their children Nicholas, Catherine, and Olivia. I mention them because they played a part in the anecdote involving Boris and me that I now describe.

The conference talks were held in meeting room on the floor one level above the ground in a nice building that must have dated from the Tito era. The lobby outside the meeting room opened onto a terrace with a balcony that overlooked a paved walking path that led down to a beautiful beach with a giant waterslide that our kids (and their parents) would go down while screaming joyously at the top of their lungs. The coffee breaks for the conference were held in the lobby and out on the terrace. At one morning coffee break I was standing at the edge of the balcony with Boris. As we were chatting, I looked out and saw Nancy and our kids and Helen and her kids coming into view as they rounded a corner on the walking path below on their way to the beach. They looked up, saw us, and waved.

Boris and I were standing right next to each other, and spontaneously we had the same idea up there on the balcony. With no words spoken, we turned toward each other and smiled, and as each of us put an arm around the other's shoulder, we slowly, and rather formally, returned the wave to Nancy, Helen, and the kids walking below us.

We were intentionally replaying another scene well known from annual May Day celebrations in Red Square, in Moscow. Below I enclose a photo from 1937, now in the public domain, that I found on the internet.



It shows some well known persons on top of Lenin's Tomb overlooking the May Day parade passing by, below them, on Red Square. Two are smiling just a bit. The well known person in the center is not quite smiling, but neither does he have the stern, serious look of his two colleagues on his right. The one farthest away became a household name in the US during my youth in the 1950s and 1960s. I remember my mother walking around our family home practicing over and over again the Russian sh-ch sound in the middle of his name as she tried to learn that language in the late 50s from televised lessons being given on what was then called "Educational TV", the predecessor of "public television" in the United States. (I still have the book she used.) She had been a French language major and Italian language minor at Wellesley College, and it was from her that I picked up an interest in and some facility for foreign languages.

If a picture had been taken of Boris and me waving as Nancy, Helen, and the kids walked below, it would have shown us smiling broadly at each other at that moment and then laughing heartily together. We had created our version of the scene in the photo above, but my mental photograph of us has us enjoying our moment much more than the comparable moment shown in the 1937 photo.

Yes, physics is international. And it took me many years to understand in my belly, not just in my head, how fundamental science transcends politics and brings us closer as humans. Boris Valerianovich helped me reach that understanding with his kind fellowship and wonderful sense of humor, and for that I am grateful to have known him.