

HISTORICAL DIPTEROLOGY

Vitaliy Nikolaevich Tanasijtshuk (Tanasiychuk)

January 18, 1928 – December 04, 2014

Valery A. Korneyev

General and Applied Entomology Department, I.I. Schmalhausen Institute of Zoology,
National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kiev, Ukraine; valery.korneyev@gmail.com



Vitaliy Nikolaevich Tanasijtshuk (Tanasiychuk), “Chook,” was born on January 18, 1928 in Murmansk, Russia. His parents were biologists at Murmansk Hydrobiological Station. Later they moved to Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg). In 1933 his father, Nikolay Parfentyevich was arrested by the KGB and after prison, exiled to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea to work as an ichthyologist at the Fishery Station. That apparently saved his life in 1937 and 1938, when many Soviet scientists, university professors, teachers, engineers and common people were imprisoned in Siberian camps for long years. His wife and son Vitaliy followed him, but in November 1941, as Nazis rapidly entered into Russia and came close to Moscow and Volga, they were forced to migrate together with prisoners on a ferry to Turkmenistan, and then in a train with luggage vans, to Uzbekistan. Passengers were dying of cold, diarrhea and camp fever, the dead were

thrown into the sea or left near the tracks without burial. Vitaliy, 13 years old, angry and suffering from rheumatism, observed that with his own eyes, and after 50 years depicted that winter in his story “The Special Migrant” (2000). Later, at the end of WWII, his family was allowed to come back to Astrakhan. In 1946 he passed his exams to Saratov University, first to the historical faculty, as he wanted to be an archaeologist. That gave him good knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek, along with his passion for ancient history. After one year and summer field trips where he was digging Scythian burial sites (mostly already robbed), he had to abandon further plans for archaeology: physicians diagnosed him a heart ailment, as the result of rheumatism survived in his childhood. Vitaliy enrolled Saratov University again, and started his specialization in entomology.

In 1950 Vitaliy started his studies on biocontrol of the olive moth in Crimea, as a student at the Nikita Botanical Garden; his supervisor was Ivan Rubtsov from the Zoological Institute. During the Christmas holidays, 1951, Vitaliy went to Leningrad as he needed confirmation of identifications of his material by experts. At the Zoological Institute of the Academy of Sciences, he met Alexander von Stackelberg. Vitaliy and spent a month in Leningrad, returning to the city of his childhood and becoming his dream.

He graduated from Saratov University in 1953, the year Stalin died. After the first attempt to pass exams for a doctoral fellowship at the Zoological Institute, Leningrad (with a very low score in the History of the Communist Party of the USSR!), Vitaliy worked at Astrakhan Nature Reserve as a zoologist for one year. His second attempt to become a doctoral student in 1954 was successful. Head of the Laboratory, Prof. Alexander von Stackelberg recommended him to study the family Chamaemyiidae, “silver flies,” with special emphasis on the genus *Leucopis*. That was his destiny.

Vitaliy Tanasijtshuk started his studies of silver flies under the supervision of Prof. Ivan Rubtsov. His first five papers, one of them in *Beiträge zur Entomologie*, resulted from comparing their aphid host species with differences in genitalic structures, which was a revolution in the systematics of Chamaemyiidae, previously based mostly on external characters. Receiving loans with the type specimens from Europe to the USSR was (and stays hitherto) extremely risky and expensive, so a few of the new species he described at that time without comparison with the types were later synonymized by Tanasijtshuk himself. But the rest, numerous species of flies he collected on his trips to his beloved Crimea, to the Caucasus and Pamir Mountains, to steppes and tundras, were really newly discovered.

Being an adored photographer, Vitaliy Tanasijtshuk was taking pictures on all his collecting trips, and not only of insects. He tried also to take underwater pictures with some self-made equipment, and also in the caves. As the prices for cameras and films were incompatible with the salary of a research scientist, Vitaliy found a source for additional funding as a text writer for the most famous Soviet popular scientific magazine “*Nauka i Zhizn*” (“Science and Life”); later some of his stories about animals were included into several picture-books for children. I was among those young readers. When I was eight years old, I found a short story with annotation of a German book “*Bau und Leben der Rhinogradentia*, with preface and illustrations by Gerolf Steiner,” which was published in the April issue, with some illustrations of weird animals, and signed by the author of that annotation, “V. Chook”. That was his common nickname among friends, and also his famous pseudonym.

He had many friends everywhere he was travelling or working. He was a child of the nineteen-sixties, a short period of freedom and hope, the so-called “Thaw”. Freedom was his faith, and universal humanistic values were his credo. As with many of my own friends, he lived his secret life in a world of “1984” or “Fahrenheit 451”; we recognized each other just from a special blink in the eyes in response to some secret words. And I was proud to be among his junior friends.

In 1986, Vitaliy Tanasijtshuk published his dipterological Magnum Opus, the chamaemyiid volume of the “Fauna of USSR”, which summarized the most comprehensive knowledge on silver flies. However, it was written in Russian. For this book, he got a certificate of Doctor of Sciences, the fourth and highest scientific degree in the Soviet academic career. These were the last days before the Berlin Wall came down, and the Iron Curtain was finally destroyed (at least as we thought then).

In 1980-1990s Vitaliy took several trips to Europe and North America, mainly with the mammoth exhibition, among them, to the Smithsonian (in 1992) and to Canada (in 1994), where he met some old friends: J. Frank McAlpine (who visited him in Leningrad in 1959) and Alex Konstantinov, whom he knew since the Soviet times. During his 1994 trip, he also visited the Illinois Natural History Survey to work with silver fly new-comer, then doctoral student Stephen Gaimari, who also returned the visit, going to Saint Petersburg for three week in 1996. After this time, due to problems with health he worked mostly at home, but it was becoming more and more difficult.

Luckily, in 1996, we both got free e-mails, and later dial-up Internet connections, which joined us for the last decade and a half. Soon after that Vitaliy Tanasijtshuk decided to concentrate his efforts on

non-fiction writing. “First of all, I promised my father, who died in 1960, to publish the diaries of his trip to Paraguay together with other four students of Saint Petersburg University in 1914-1917, and I have to keep my promises. Also, I want to write about him, his life after 1917. And I have a dream to write a book about my colleagues and friends, about Zoological Institute, our collecting trips and — about flies.”

After his first autobiographical story “The Special Migrant” («Спецпереселенец», 2000) he published a captivating book “The Five on Rio de Paraguay” («Пятеро на Рио де Парагвай», КМК Press, 2003) based on his father’s diaries, drawings and photographs; it can be considered a perfectly balanced retelling with landscapes, floras, faunas, persons, events, and dialogues reconstructed in minutest details, as if the writer were eyewitness of that trip. His next book, “Incredible Zoology (Zoological Myths and Mystifications)” («Невероятная зоология (зоологические мифы и мистификации)», КМК Press, 2009) was dedicated to the memory of his late friend Cyrill Yuryev, a great expert in the history of biology, from Gessner to Stümpke, and from Unicorn to Big Foot, a wonderful read about cryptozoology written by a true zoologist.

The last, and in my opinion, the main book written by Vitaliy Tanasijtshuk, was “Is the Fly a Chirrer? Memoires of an Old Entomologist” («Цокотуха ли муха? Записки старого энтомолога», КМК Press, 2011). This is a long and detailed trip to the past time, which keeps the memories of all the peculiar personalities, mostly zoologists he met in his life, from his parents, Nikolay and Vera, to our contemporaries and colleagues. It is not only a good reading. Every time I open it, I cannot stop that conversation with a quiet and refined interlocutor of the kind I rarely met on my way.

In 2013 we, my son Severyn and I, visited Vitaly and his wife, Dora, at their place twice. We fixed a drop of “Our Lady’s Milk” white wine and “Hennessy” and were talking. Just talking, about everything in the world, trips, poetry, common friends, living and passed away.



In the end we discussed his old article in the magazine “Science and Life”, in which Vitaliy told a story of miraculous discovery of the photographs taken in 1906-1913 in Koktebel, Crimea, where he started his studies of the silver flies. Numerous negatives were given to him by the widow of Maximilian Voloshin, a sculptor, painter and one of the most important poets in the Silver Age of Russian poetry. These photographs depicted many guests of Voloshin’s “House of Poet” in Koktebel, including Marina Tsvetaeva, Nikolay Gumilev and some other key persons of Russian literature before the WWI. Then we published the story and pictures on [Flickr](#).

In three weeks I was home, and there was a hot winter on Maidan in Kyiv, and then the annexing of Crimea by Putin’s Russia, and then the war with Russia. All this time Vitaliy Nikolayevich tried to support us Ukrainians. He was the only of my Russian friends who was not afraid to tell this aloud. “For your and our freedom.” And I greatly appreciate that.

And then... Then he died in his little flat in Saint Petersburg at night. His beloved Dora, who was with him all his life, and saved his life many times before that, could not manage to do anything that time. He was in the age when heartbeats and breaths sometimes become so weak that they cannot support even the most peculiar and brilliant brains and minds anymore. At ten a.m., when all the formalities were done, and only a heavy painless emptiness left with her, Dora turned on Vitaliy's computer and sent a short message.



“Tonight at four a.m., December 4, 2014, Vitaliy Nikolayevich Tanasiychuk passed away. He was 86, seriously ill for a long time, but never gave up. In his last days he said ‘I had a long and very lucky life’.”

I answered on his FB page: “Vitaliy Nikolayevich, how so? You had to, you were just obliged to live forever, climbing out from your diseases and starting up new books! We were always waiting you drop a line, every day, understanding that this next letter might be the last one.

You have done a miracle, you have done an impossible thing, you have had written all you wanted. I promised you to publish the photographs of Maximillian Voloshin you saved many years ago, and I am doing it today again as a memory of you and the magic hours of conversation with you. Thank you. We greatly appreciate your refinement and honesty, obtained from suffering, for your civic stance paid by personal knowledge of essence of Russian power, for your incredible erudition and your talent to be a Man with every authority. I do not say “we mourn”. After all, you need a rest from earthly work and suffering. We’ll meet again. Surely.”



Editor's note:

As a tribute to two great Russian dipterists, Vitali Tanasiytshuk and Vera Richter, long time colleagues at the Zoological Institute who passed away within two short months of each other, here is a photo I took of them during my 1996 visit, over one of our daily coffee breaks. Vitali greatly encouraged and influenced my interest in chamaemyiids, and I am forever grateful for all the knowledge he passed me, and the help he was always so happy to provide. He was a phenomenally generous man, and I am forever grateful for the leg up he gave me. He will be sorely missed.

Please see the memorial for Vera Richter in Korotyaev & Ovtshinnikova (2015). My fond memories of Vera include our daily lunches at the Institute's cafeteria, and great conversations about a lot of things, from flies to Russian history and culture.
