

■ ABOUT VICTOR I. STEPANOV

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Victor Stepanov was a unique personality in several respects, but first of all he was a unique mineralogist. Once during our student days one of our mates brought a druse of sugar crystals from Uzbekistan. Everyone knew that Victor was an excellent mineral identifier so we decided to spoof him a little. During the recreation period, Victor was shown the druse and asked to identify the mineral. He just overturned the specimen twice and put it in his mouth. “What are you doing?!” yelled the joker, fully taken aback. But the druse was already gone...

Once I tried to pull Victor’s leg myself too. During my work in the Transbaikalia region I became very well acquainted with Vera Parfentyevna Rogova, the mineralogist of the Sosnovskaya expedition and the discoverer of charoite, who offered me a small piece of this recently discovered mineral which had no name by that time. I showed it to Victor: “*Try to identify it*”. Victor examined the specimen thoroughly, having taken a magnifying glass out of his pocket. “*I don’t know what kind of mineral this is*, — he answered with his accent from the Volga region, — *but I can tell who has given it to you*”.

He named three persons, including Rogova. It still remains a riddle for me about where Victor learned all the news of mineralogy. He had a wide circle of friends and soaked up any new information about minerals like a sponge, memorizing it immediately.

We were acquainted since our student days at MGRI (presently named Russian State Geological Prospecting University). Every Sunday we travelled with backpacks to the quarries, gullies and other spots of mineralogical interest around Moscow. These trips were taken on a regular basis, especially in the spring and fall. He always took the role of an informal leader there. Every one of us had geological hammers, but Stepanov carried with him a 3 kg heavy sledge and other heavy tools. It’s notable that he could visit the same quarry several times yet find something new and interesting each time. He created the modern mineralogy of the Moscow region. We knew very little about it before his work.

There was one more hot spot for a select circle. We dug the ground under the “Karpinsky bridge”. For some reason this nickname had been given to a little ravine near today’s building of the Fersman Mineralogical Museum of the Russian Academy

of Sciences where, in 1934, the boxes with geological specimens, including those of the Mineralogical Museum, were stored during the relocation of the Academy of Sciences from Leningrad to Moscow.

Not until 1936 was the museum afforded an antique building in Moscow — the former riding hall of the Neskuchny palace, which required a substantial renovation and rearrangement. The boxes have been rotting in topen air for a long while. Some of them just fell apart, and many specimens were lost and remained at their “temporary storage” place. All interesting items that could be found were submitted to Victor’s evaluation and thus they supplemented his unique collection which finally was transferred to the Mineralogical Museum and is kept there up to the present time.

The minerals in his collection are not just very well attributed, but they are also perfectly prepared. He was as fond of the preparation as much as the search and collection. For hours, he was able to work on a piece of stone with multiple various tools in order to make a museum exhibit piece of it. He enjoyed the process aesthetically.

As a native collector, Victor Ivanovich was unable to neglect any item that was missing in his collection. Once I brought a very good specimen of long-acicular goethite in a barite lode from the uranium deposit of Adrasman. Victor immediately required me to give it to him. I told him that it would be my pleasure, but I could not tell him the location since those of the uranium deposits were strictly kept in secret. He was begging me for several days and finally agreed to take the specimen without specifying the location: “*I’ll know it later anyway*.” I had to give him the mineral.

Victor was a unique knower of minerals and was able to identify not just the kind, but also the origin of the specimen being analyzed. When I asked him about the source of his knowledge, he usually answered: “*I can’t explain it, I don’t understand it exactly myself, but I always know*”. I suppose that with his phenomenal capacity for work he examined lots of material with his own hands. He used any opportunity to see a new specimen. In the sentence quoted above “exactly” is the key word. He liked exactness and precision in everything, not just when describing the minerals and their interconnections. This may have been the cause of his conflict in the Institute of the Ore Deposits Geology, Petrography, Mineralogy and Geochemistry (IGEM).

At that time, in the 1950's, geologists were fascinated by the genesis of geological material and in mineral wealth. A large monograph — “Major problems of the magmatogene ore genesis” (1953) had just appeared and was used as a canonic book for those who were studying endogen ores. Providing excellent descriptions of deposits, Victor could not fit them into the genetic clichés of that time. Moreover, the so-called fish diagrams, showing the strict consequence of the mineral deposition, which were very popular then, did not enthuse him at all. The reports were delayed and the management became nervous while Victor was able to criticize in public the canonical scientists and their supporters. Of course, the management was outraged by such behaviour, and Victor had to leave the institute.

Fortunately, Stepanov's talent did not get lost. He was immediately employed by the Institute of Mineralogy, Geochemistry and Crystal Chemistry of Rare Chemical Elements (IMGRE) and engaged in his favorite activity — the creation of the Museum of Rare Elements Minerals. He had a true calling for deep and fine studies of minerals, and he loved them. Victor created systematized collections of minerals that included absolutely unique specimens. His collection became one of national importance. At the same time, he helped the institute's employees determine the mineral composition of ores in the deposits that they were examining. Often, such consulting conversations turned into very interesting discussions in which Victor showed an ability to listen and to discuss most topics, while his authority in mineral identification remained undisputable. In fact, nobody even tried to dispute it. The institute had gained a high-class mineralogist, who facilitated many employee's work.

Victor showed an astonishing ability to work, not only at his workplace, but everywhere. He also was always ready to help other people, never demonstrating his superiority. Other people's success made him happy. He had a matchless smile, and his eyes were shining with joy. But he never tolerated arrogance from others.

Victor visited my place often, especially when we both were living on Fersman Street, within a 5–7 minutes walking distance. He stayed a bachelor for a long time and visited us on Sundays. Our conversations here did not usually treat mineralogical topics. We talked about geology in its broadest sense, the general issues of natural sciences development, art, sports and just about life.

With all his passion for mineralogy he did not lose his interest for natural science in total and he had his own point of view on most fundamental problems. His main interest was the cognition of the Nature's objects. When I introduced him to Anatoly Sergeyevich Arsen'ev, who was a very interesting philosopher and led the methodological workshop “Science and man” in our institute, Victor became so interested that he started to attend this workshop. The topic of interconnection between sci-

ence and philosophy often dominated our conversations. He supported the scientific approach but tolerated no dogmas and considered it necessary to prove any theory by practical observation. Being a very good knower of practical mineralogical material, he often got indignant at the fudging of facts by the theoretical dogmas.

Victor was a passionate downhill skier and told us ardently about the new descent technique — on parallel ski, which was just beginning to gain ground in our country. He was slightly mocking us because we had hardly learned the old “Austrian” slalom technique. But even when mocking, he stayed good-natured and tried to share his skills with others in a very peculiar manner. He might act like a teacher but he never was rough. His self-confidence in this field, like in other ones, was based on his own practical experience. He never was a doctrinaire and he had an ability not only to speak, but to listen, to other people. To make a long story short, he was an interesting person.

Maybe we owe our communication to the fact that Victor chose me for best man at his wedding with Clara, a chemist from the Geological Institute (Victor got married rather late). The celebration was modest and took place in a cafe. I would not say that the marriage would have affected his work to any extent, but Victor's character became much more gentle.

We met each other less often after the wedding, but the essence of our meetings remained the same. We just emphasized more the general issues of natural sciences development and the importance of precise observations when studying minerals ontogeny. The meetings with Yuri Maximovich Dymkov were especially interesting because this man had an ability to see, to understand, and to draw the minerals on paper and to explain the ontogeny of particular specimens. Stepanov gave way to Yuri Maximovich but never acted like a passive disciple. All discussions, which sometimes became really ardent, were strictly domain-specific. Victor discovered minor inaccuracies in Dymkov's magnificent drawings, which were only visible by a well-trained professional eyes.

After Victor's marriage, Dymkov and I regularly celebrated his birthday on January 7th (Victor's birthday corresponds with the orthodox Christmas) at his place. Here, Victor had a very down-home and familiar look. He was quiet, gentle and not a bit aggressive, very calm and friendly with children and considerate towards his wife. His face smiled all evening long.

Victor Ivanovich Stepanov's decease was a significant loss for us. First of all, we lost an excellent mineralogist and an unmatched mineral collector. But besides this, he will always remain a very humane person (with all his up and downsides) in the memories of those who had close contact to him. He has not defended any thesis or doctorate, but the collection that he has put together and has given to the Museum clearly testifies to the effect of his scientific potential and the contribution that he has made to the science.