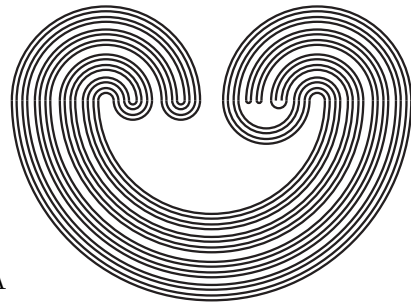


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P. S. URYSOHN: NEW ASPECTS OF HIS DEATH

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ABSTRACT. This paper is to further clarify the swimming accident which claimed the life of Pavel Samuelovich Urysohn through the descriptions contained in two newspaper articles in French newspapers which no longer exist.

1. INTRODUCTION

To date, the only published eyewitness account (to the author's knowledge) of the events of the swimming accident which claimed the life of Pavel Samuelovich Urysohn has been that of his companion Pavel Sergeevich Alexandroff. This account has appeared in print in only one place that we know: Alexandroff's autobiography [1]. Thanks to the world of computers, email, and the World Wide Web, Andre Duhoux, the second author, contacted the first author in early summer 2000 about pictures on his professional web page involving the incident. Later he provided pictures of the area where the accident occurred and also a photostatic copy of Urysohn's death certificate. Continuing his investigations, Duhoux discovered and translated the two articles, [2] and [3], which are the main source of information for this article.

The author understands that Alexandroff's published account is part of an excerpt from what was to have been a book length version to have been published in German by Springer-Verlag. In

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The first author wishes to thank his co-author for his discovery and translation of the two newspaper articles.

the spring of 1979, the author was privileged to have a conversation with Alexandroff and A. N. Tychonoff in the former's apartment. During the conversation (in Russian), Tychonoff corrected Alexandroff's memory of events several times. Afterward, Arkadii Maltsev, secretary for and the author's intermediary with Alexandroff, told the author that for the most part Alexandroff basically reiterated his words from the autobiography.

In order to tell the story, we will use the format of direct quotations and intersperse Alexandroff's published account and the two newspaper articles, with citations. As deemed appropriate, the author's comments, pointing out differences in the accounts, will appear in italics. There are no shocking revelations and there is no substantial change in the validity of Alexandroff's account; the newspaper accounts merely put a different light on the event.

2. THE ACCOUNTS

Alexandroff:

The main part of the day was spent on work, and in spite of our custom it was already five o'clock in the afternoon when we got ready to go swimming. When we got into the water, a kind of uneasiness rose up within us; I not only felt it myself, but I also saw it clearly in Pavel. If only I had said, "Maybe we shouldn't swim today?" But said nothing.... [1]

Newspaper Accounts

Last Sunday afternoon, about 5 p.m., two young men of Russian nationality, Mr. Paul Urysohn and Mr. Paul Alexandroff, aged 24 and 27, both lecturers of mathematics at Moscow University and staying in Batz for their holiday at Mr. Naudin's Val Renaud boarding-house, were swimming opposite the Black Village in very rough seas. This stretch of rocky coastline was particularly dangerous yesterday and the waves came crashing with unbelievable violence. [2]

Two famous Russian lecturers, Mr. Paul Alexandroff and Mr. Paul Urysohn, who had been staying in Batz for their holiday at Val Renaud boarding-house for a few days, were enjoying their usual swim near a place called the Black Village, opposite the former Lehuede quarry-site. [3]

Here is the only discrepancy of consequence: Alexandroff's account makes no mention that they realized the danger they were in and were headed for shore, while one account explicitly states their awareness [author].

Alexandroff:

After a moment's hesitation, we plunged into a not very large shore wave and swam some distance into the open sea. [1]

Newspaper Account:

They were about 300 yards from the shore when they must have realized the danger they ran and tried to make for dry land. [2]

This account gives the first indication of how long the two had been swimming when the deadly wave hit them [author].

Newspaper Account:

Some strollers and people in the chalets nearby had been anxiously watching for a quarter of an hour the two young men who desperately fought against the furious seas. [2]

Alexandroff:

However, the very next sensation that reached my consciousness was one of something indescribably huge, which suddenly grabbed me, and this sensation was accompanied by the rather absurd but quite precisely formulated thought: had this wave come to me all the way from Venezuela to no useful purpose here? [1]

Newspaper Accounts:

Then, suddenly, a groundswell hurled the two swimmers on to the shore. Mr Alexandroff was no longer out of his depth and, looking for his friend, caught sight of his apparently lifeless body, bobbing up and down. [2]

When they were 50 yards away from the rocks, they were suddenly separated by a groundswell. Mr Urysohn was thrown against a rock and his friend was fortunate enough to cling to another rock while another groundswell swept Mr Urysohn away. [3]

As we see in the next part of Alexandroff's account, he recalls being cast upon the shore rather than clinging to a rock [author].

Alexandroff:

A moment later I came to myself on the shore, which was covered with small stones - it was the shore of a bay, separated from the open sea by two rocks between which we had had to swim as we made our way to open sea. I had been thrown over by a wave, right across these rocks and the bay. When I was on my feet, I looked out to sea and saw Pavel at those same rocks, already in the bay, passively rolling on the waves (which were comparatively small in the bay) in a half-sitting position. I immediately swam up to him. [1]

Here occurs the largest discrepancy between Alexandroff's recollection and the two articles. Alexandroff indicates that he swam without a rope until he was almost ashore while the articles report that Alexandroff was harnessed with a rope before going after Urysohn. The author is inclined to accept the two newspaper accounts because Alexandroff was in a state of high anxiety and most probably in shock. By all accounts Urysohn was the more athletic and better swimmer as, among other things, is indicated by his leading the way out. Also, Alexandroff almost always wore glasses because of his poor eyesight. One can always say that telling the story of a rescue without aid makes one appear more heroic [author].

Alexandroff:

At that time I saw a large group of people on the shore. (It was a Sunday, and many people from various places had come to Batz to admire the sea.) After swimming to Pavel, I put my right arm around him above his waist, and with my left arm and my legs I began to paddle to shore with all my might. This was difficult, but no one came to my assistance. Finally, when I was already quite near the shore, someone threw me a rope but within a few moments I reached land. Then eye witnesses told me that the same great wave that had thrown me across the bay had struck Urysohn's head against one of the two rocks and after that he had begun to roll helplessly on the waves in the bay. [1]

Newspaper Accounts:

Mr. Cruard, who is the owner of Ker Raymonde Chalet, rushed to throw Mr. Alexandroff a rope with which the latter, heedless of danger, dived back into the sea to try and rescue his friend but the rope was too short and he had to have another go and try to rescue the poor man who had been swept farther away by a bigger wave.

With much endeavor, dropping the rope that had been handed to him, then getting hold of it, he was able to bring his unfortunate friend to the shore.... [2]

Mr. Alexandroff was then harnessed so as to jump into the sea again, where he eventually managed with great difficulty to reach his unfortunate friend and bring him back to the shore. [3]

Alexandroff:

When I pulled Pavel to the shore and felt the warmth of his body in my hand, I was in no doubt that he was alive. Some people then ran up to him, and began to do something to him, obviously artificial

respiration. Among the people, there happened to be, as I was later told, a doctor, who apparently directed the attempts at life-saving. I do not know and did not know then how long they continued, it seemed like quite a long time. In any case, after some time I asked the doctor what the condition of the victim was and what further measures he proposed undertaking. To this the doctor replied, "Que voulez vous que je fasse avec un cadavre?"

As I now remember, the only thought that entered my mind when I heard these words was that the word "fass" is the "present de subjonctif" form of the verb "faire" and that our French teacher at my school had often asked us for this form and for the subjunctive in general. [1]

Newspaper Accounts:

...but unhappily, despite the care provided by Doctor Machefer from Nantes, who was on holiday in Batz and the many people who immediately rushed to perform artificial respiration, Mr. Urysohn had passed away.

A wave had sent him crashing against a rock, smashing his head.

One can imagine the despair of his friend whose endeavor had been heroic but helpless. [2]

Unfortunately it was too late and despite artificial respiration, and all the care provided, Doctor Machefer from Nantes, who happened to be present, could only certify his death.

From the shore, a crowd of people overcome with emotion had anxiously witnessed the dramatic events and the drowning is now everybody's topic of conversation. Mr. Urysohn was famous as a scientist and, like his friend, taught mathematics at the University of Moscow. His death is a great loss for science. [3]

Alexandroff:

Some more time passed, and I went into my room and finally dressed. (Until then I had remained in my swimming clothes.) Pavel Urysohn lay on his bed, covered by a sheet; there were flowers at the head of the bed. It was here that I thought for the first time about what had happened. All my experiences, all my impressions of that summer, and indeed of the last two years, rose up in my consciousness, with such distinctness and clarity. All this merged into a single awareness of how good, how exceptionally good, things had been for each of us, only about an hour ago. [1]

Newspaper Account:

Mr. Urysohn's funeral will take place in Batz at ten o'clock on Tuesday morning. [2]

Alexandroff:

And the sea raged. Its roaring, its crashing, its bubbling, seemed to fill everything. [1]

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