

## MEMORIES OF MY FATHER, GEORGE GAMOW

R. Igor Gamow



Dear friends and colleagues:

To say that I am happy to be here today is such an understatement that I shiver in embarrassment. But, say it I must. For the first time in my life I am not only in the country and city of my Father's birth, but also for the first time in my life I am in a country where everyone is speaking Russian. And to top it all off, it is as if I drank a magic potion, because I can understand the language! It was the language of my childhood. Not only the language I understood but also the spirit and magic of the Russian language. I remember Father's love for Pushkin and how as a boy he went with his Father to the opera to see Pushkin's *Ruslan and Ludmilla* fairy tale and how excited Father was to see and to hear how the hero, *Ruslan*, searched for *Chernomor* and then finally killed the black magician. Today, I feel the same excitement my Father felt seeing this opera. In my Russian bones, I feel the excitement that *Ruslan* must have felt when he found his stolen bride, *Ludmilla*. I have found Odessa. I not only found Odessa, or Odessa me, but with my great cousin, Igor L. Gamow, we found the birthplace of my Father and we, of course, drank vodka at this place in his memory.

There are a hundred stories (perhaps in the spirit of the Russian language I should say 40 stories!) about Father, but I have chosen two. The first story I have chosen happened in 1949, when I was fourteen, and we were vacationing in California and staying in a beach front motel. While swimming in the surf, I found a sea gull (I can still hear Father say *Chauka*) which, because of a nearby oil rig, was covered with oil. I swam to shore with my prized sea gull and took her (I assumed

she was a princess that I rescued) to the motel for cleaning. The only cleaning fluid available was cigarette lighter fluid for my Father's ever present Zippo lighter. You can imagine what a mess everything was: a wet oily bird, towel after towel covered with heavy crude oil and sand, my beautiful Russian Mother, *Rho*, complaining about the disorder, and my smiling Father in his wild colorful Hawaiian shirt looking on. In the midst of all this commotion appeared two somber men dressed in black suits who introduced themselves as G-men (government men in charge of American security). Father, because of his past Soviet experiences, was of course concerned, but they reassured Father that they simply needed to know whether he had ever served in the armed forces of any country. Father smiled and said that as a matter of fact he had and was pleased to tell them he was once a colonel in the Red Army in the Artillery School of the Red October! You can imagine the G-men's excitement when they learned that one of America's top atomic scientists was once a colonel in the Red Army and they had never asked him! A few days later, the excitement disappeared when it was revealed that Father's position was given to him through the University of Leningrad's academic program and he was therefore of little security concern. But for a while it was quite exciting. The sea gull, by the way, survived and may still be flying over the beaches in California. Sea gulls live a long time, and in one's imagination, forever!

My second story concerns my Father and Mother's attempted escape in a small "Faltboat" from Crimea to Turkey. I, of course, heard many stories of this voyage. I heard about the storms, the porpoises that they played with, their small boat, Father's kidney stone attack in the midst of all this, and finally their forced beaching-not in Turkey, alas, but on the ever present Soviet soil. How my heart raced when Misha Ryabov and his his colleagues took me sailing on the Black Sea in a small boat not filled with Brandy and hard chocolate as my parents boat had been but with vodka and sausages. I felt I was following the wake of a little mystical boat that held my two parents so many, many years ago.

So, my friends, here are my two stories, but I hope in the years to come to tell you many more stories. My Father loved *Alice in Wonderland* and I can hear his voice quoting the Walrus: "The time has come to speak of many things..."



Figure 1. George Gamow (3 years old) at the village near Odessa.



George Gamow and his father Anton Gamow  
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George Gamow and his mother Alexandra Lebedenez Gamow  
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George Gamow  
Copyright - The Gamow Family



Figure 3, 4. G.A. Gamow and his wife L.N.Vokhmintseva.





Figure 5. G. Gamow and W. Pauli

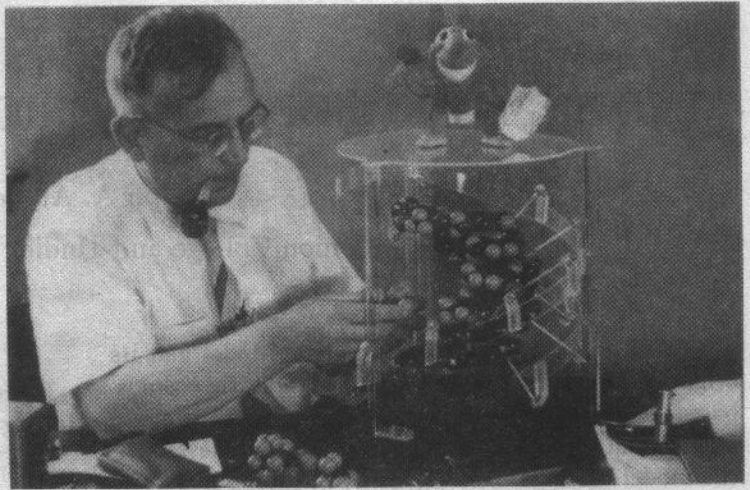


Figure 6. G.A. Gamow and DNA

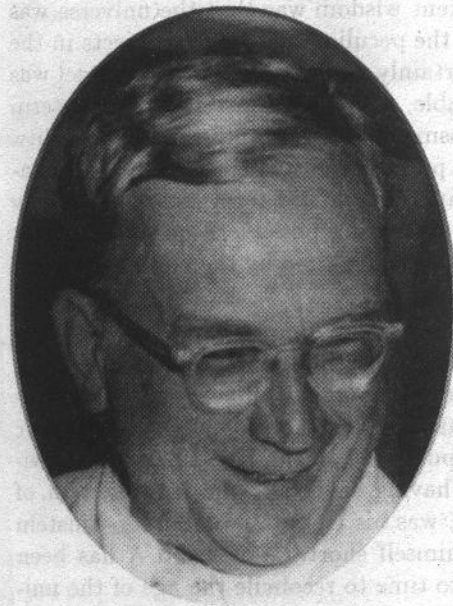


Figure 7. Awarded Kalinga Prize by UNESCO for popularization of science.



Figure 8. G.A. Gamow.

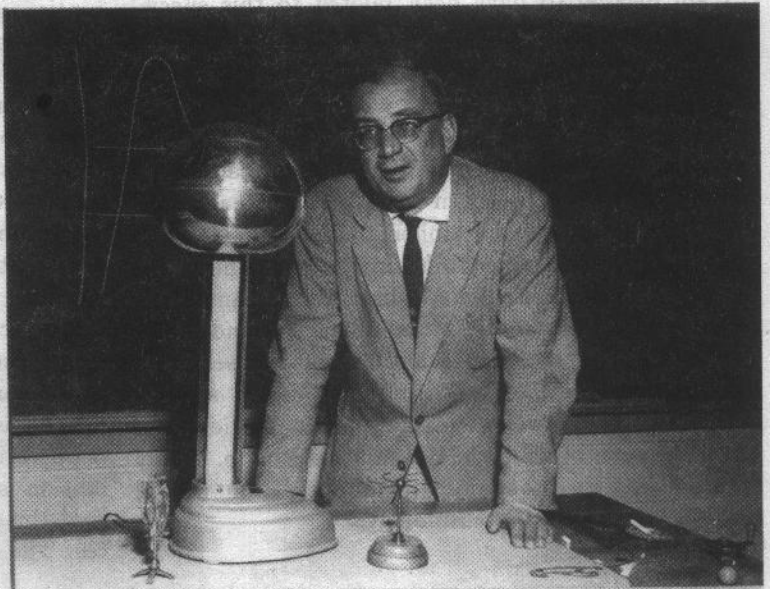


Figure 9. G.A. Gamow – visiting Professor of the University of California, Berkeley (1954).