

## PETER JAGERS: SOME REMINISCENCES ON HIS RETIREMENT

BY EUGENE SENETA

I have always been pleased to speak of Peter as my twin, since we were born on the very same day, 12th March 1941. The coincidences go further: our mothers were Jewish when it was a bad time to be Jewish. We were both brought up in a Christian tradition.

Although he was born in Gothenburg, his parents (who had moved to Sweden just before the Second World War) and mine, and I also, were born in parts of what had been the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. I enjoyed seeing the effects of that old-world courtesy, the hand-kissing and waltz-dancing tradition in our meetings over the years, although young Peter, as I called him, sometimes adopted a less formal attitude in his manner of dress.

Many of us will remember that somewhat loud, though no doubt warm, baggy yellow and brown banded pullover, which did not at all do justice to his aristocratic demeanor, nor sylph-like figure, though it is clearly something he loves.

And we both finished up as Professors of Mathematical Statistics, in small countries of approximately the same size. We both worked on branching processes, and both learned Russian which helped us in the early and later years, especially with the branching process literature, then and long after dominated by Russian-language literature.

The Swedish Vikings in about 882 had established the Rurik dynasty in Kyiv (Kiev), the capital of ancient Rus', and now the capital of an independent Ukraine; Sweden's Charles the 12th had helped Mazeppa, in trying to liberate Ukraine from Muscovy's grasp, but unfortunately the Battle of Poltava in 1709 put an end to that.

In this historical tradition, at the second Scandinavian–Ukrainian conference in Umeå, Sweden, in 1997, toasts were made to the Scandinavian–Ukrainian–Australian alliance. Much was made of the ancient trade route 'from the Varangians [Vikings] to the Greeks [Byzantium]' where Peter's very favourite of the Ukrainian participants added, as was appropriate, 'through Kyiv'. At another dinner, an Australian participant, our friend Pani Maria (Mary Phipps), recited a beautiful poem in Ukrainian.

And now, a walk down memory lane.

I remember some time in the late 1960s writing to young Peter. His reply, which I kept for many years as a souvenir, but which has, when I need it, vanished, concluded with the sentence that his paper, was 'however, in Russian', which aroused both my envy and admiration.

I visited Gothenburg only once, in 1985, and it was then that his secretary noticed that we had the same birthday. I have some wonderful photos from that Gothenburg visit: one features young Peter, with his son in a pram, near the water; and another is of Peter with Torgny Lindvall and Olle Nerman. They were the entire audience for my seminar on Chuprov's mathematical skills and Scandinavian connections; but *what* an audience.

My recollection is that our first meeting in Sydney was in 1989. At that time, I took him to see the Blue Mountains in my then-new car, but as we walked around on the level paths there, his mind was elsewhere, on some new challenging mathematical problem. A true, and splendid, scientist.

I think he stayed then, as he did on his subsequent visits to Sydney, at Ms. Lesslie's guest house in the bohemian surrounds of Glebe, where over the years, we had numerous coffees

and beers. The most recent time was probably during the 2005 ISI Meeting, in the company of Olle Nerman and David Vere-Jones. I have some photos of a group of us at a pizza place near the meeting venue: a happy time of friendship.

A real source of confusion between us arose at the 4th World Congress of the Bernoulli Society at our ancestral capital, Vienna, 26–31 August 1996, when I asked Peter to present my paper *Irenée-Jules Bienaymé (1796–1878) and the beginnings of branching process theory*. In spite of Peter's several announcements that he was not Professor Seneta, and thus would not answer questions, especially about Smoluchowski's role in the history of branching process estimation, it appears he was continually mistaken for me and subjected to questions.

I wanted to be in Vienna, but the year or two before had been Nikolai Yanev's *Branching Processes: The First World Congress* in Varna, Bulgaria, which featured a nice mix of Slavic and Western branching process theorists. Features for me were Volodya Vatutin's discussion of my Western-centric opening presentation of early history; and Jean-Pierre Dion's observation about unpublished results of one of his students not being duly recognized, and undue credit being given, instead, to Epps and Seneta.

Our good friend Chris Heyde presided over that opening session in Varna. From Australia also came Malcolm Quine and Fima Klebaner, and this apparently initiated regular trips to Melbourne in the Land of Oz by Peter, where he also has a cousin.

What do I remember about young Peter at Varna? One afternoon, while the rest of us religiously attended the talks, he betook himself off to the markets, and managed to get himself a cheap and elegant haircut, no doubt having charmed the barber with his command of Russian, and a small tip of leva, the local currency.

Peter's magisterial demeanor came to the fore in the first two Scandinavian–Ukrainian conferences, where he took several eminent speakers to task. The first conference was held in Uzh-horod (Uzhgorod is the Russian pronunciation), in trans-Carpathian Ukraine, in 1995. We were accommodated in a hotel in which the toilet in my room was one of the few that worked, and so was used by both young Peter, and my Australian colleague, Mary Phipps.

I translated from Ukrainian to English for the conferees, including young Peter, round a huge table the talk given to us at a local winery by the local vigneron on the *masculinity-enabling effects*, among others, of the local product.

And then there were the ISI conferences where Peter and I met and discussed the state of the statistical world: in Beijing (1995), in Helsinki (1999), Berlin (2003), and Sydney (2005). Young Peter led me to the old part of Beijing, where we had a meal in a local restaurant by a lake, where no one spoke any English—a great meal and excellent company—and then we walked back on foot—a rather long walk, where only Peter knew where we were.

To conclude, I want to transmit also best wishes from Pani Maria and Neville Weber.

When I saw Chris Heyde for the last time in Canberra Hospital on February 29, 2008, just a few days before his untimely death on March 6, 2008, one of the things he still wanted to do was to send Peter a letter for this birthday occasion. His funeral on March 13 was a celebration of a life well lived.

And I ask, after this letter is read, that you all drink to Peter in the Viking manner, to celebrate young Peter's job well done, and to anticipate, as I do, many happy and productive years yet to come in his enrichment of statistics, and of life!!

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