

# The Mind OF A Mnemonist



A LITTLE  
BOOK  
ABOUT A  
VAST  
MEMORY

**A. R. LURIA**

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY

Jerome S. Bruner

---

*A Little Book  
about a Vast Memory*

# THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

*A. R. Luria*

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN  
*by Lynn Solotaroff*

*With a Foreword by Jerome S. Bruner*

BASIC BOOKS, INC., PUBLISHERS  
*New York / London*

---

© 1968 by Basic Books, Inc.  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 68-15918  
Manufactured in the United States of America  
Designed by Loretta Li

---

. The time has come, the walrus said, to  
talk of many things . . .

LEWIS CARROLL  
*Through the Looking-Glass*

. . . Together with little Alice we will slip  
past the smooth, cold surface of the looking  
glass and find ourselves in a wonderland,  
where everything is at once so familiar and  
recognizable, yet so strange and uncommon.

---

# FOREWORD

*Jerome S. Bruner*

This book is an extraordinary tribute to Aleksandr Romanovich Luria. The richness of clinical insight, the acuity of the observations, and the fullness of the over-all picture of his mnemonist are all extraordinary. Luria tells us that he is treating the "case" as a study of a syndrome, a type of study in which he is especially skilled, as we know from his fine work on various patterns of brain lesions. What emerges is a perceptive study not only of memory organization but also of the manner in which memory is imbedded in a pattern of life. As a contribution to the clinical literature on memory pathology, this book will surely rank as a classic.

Though the title of this book suggests a study of great feats of memory, it is in fact a book about the failure of one aspect of memory and the hypertro-

---

## FOREWORD

viii

phy of another. For the mnemonist, S., whose case is studied in such exquisite detail in these pages, is a man whose memory is a memory of particulars, particulars that are rich in imagery, thematic elaboration, and affect. But it is a memory that is peculiarly lacking in one important feature: the capacity to convert encounters with the particular into instances of the general, enabling one to form general concepts even though the particulars are lost. It is this latter type of "memory without record" that seems so poorly developed in this man.

Several notable things about the disorders of this mnemonist are especially fascinating from a psychological point of view. For one thing, the sheer persistence of ikonic memory is so great that one wonders whether there is some failure in the swift metabolism of short-term memory. His "immediate" images haunt him for hours, types of images that in much recent work on short-term memory are found to fade to a point where information retrieval from them is not possible after a second or so. Along with this trait there is also a non-selectivity about his memory, such that what remains behind is a kind of junk heap of impressions. Or perhaps this mnemonic disarray results from the evident failure to organize and "regularize" what is remembered into the kinds of schemata that Bartlett described

in such detail in his classic *Remembering*. Curiously enough, and typically, our mnemonist has great difficulty organizing disparate encounters in terms of invariant features that characterize them.

The gift of persistent, concrete memory appears to make for highly concrete thinking, a kind of thinking in images that is very reminiscent of young children whose thought processes my colleagues and I have been studying (e.g., in *Studies in Cognitive Growth*, 1966). S.'s grouping of objects and words are thematic, associative, bound in a flow of edge-related images, almost with a feeling of naive poetry. ". . . A *zhuk*—that's a dented piece in the potty . . . It's a piece of rye bread . . . And in the evening when you turn on the light, that's also a *zhuk*, for the entire room isn't lit up, just a small area, while everything else remains dark, a *zhuk*. Warts are also a *zhuk*... Now I see them sitting me before a mirror. There's noise, laughter. There are my eyes staring at me from the mirror—dark—they're also a *zhuk*." So the mnemonist tries to define a childhood phrase he recalls at one of his sessions. But though the account has a kind of naive poetry, it is misleading to think of the gift of poetry as within this man's reach. In fact, he has great difficulty in understanding some poems of Pasternak that were used for testing. He cannot get behind the

---

## FOREWORD

x

surface images; he seems to be caught with the superficial meanings of words and cannot deal with their intended metaphor.

So powerful is his imagery that this man can easily drive his pulse up by imagining running. He is flooded and disturbed by the images and impressions of childhood, and, when he was a child, his imagery of school would become so "real" that he would lie abed rather than get out from under the quilt and get ready. It is interesting that, given his mode of remembering, there seems to be no childhood amnesia, and his memories from the earliest period can cause him acute malaise and chagrin. Throughout, there is a childlike quality in the protocols, protocols that are rich beyond anything I have ever encountered in the psychological literature on memory disorders. S.'s life in some deeply touching way is a failure. He waited for something to happen to him, some great thing. In the conduct of his life, too, there was a passive-receptive attitude, almost precluding organized striving. In place of the more abstract and constructional attitude of planning, there was waiting.

In writing this foreword, I cannot forgo one personal remark. I am among those who have been fortunate enough to have examined patients with Professor Luria at the Budenko Neurological Hos-

---

*Foreword*

xi

pital in Moscow. It is an experience never to be forgotten, for his subtle capacity for bringing important material to light by ingenious questions and novel procedures is truly remarkable. It was no less so in the 1920's, when this study began. What is evident in this early work, as in his most recent work, is Professor Luria's ability to combine the clinical wisdom of the fine physician with the theoretical acumen of the scientific psychologist. May these talents be more widely spread among us in the future. Perhaps this book will encourage others like it.

*Cambridge, Mass.*  
*October 21, 1967*

---

# P R E F A C E

I spent this summer off in the country, away from the city. Through the open windows I could hear the leaves rustling on the trees and catch the fragrant smell of grass. On my desk lay some old, yellowed notes from which I put together this brief account of a strange individual: a Jewish boy who, having failed as a musician and as a journalist, had become a mnemonist, met with many prominent people, yet remained a somewhat anchorless person, living with the expectation that at any moment something particularly fine was to come his way. He taught me and my friends a great deal, and it is only right that this book be dedicated to his memory.

A. R. L.

*Summer 1965*

---

# C O N T E N T S

1	<i>Introduction</i>	3
2	<i>The Beginning of the Research</i>	7
3	<i>His Memory</i>	15
	THE INITIAL FACTS	16
	SYNESTHESIA	21
	-WORDS AND IMAGES	29
	DIFFICULTIES	38
	EIDOTECHNIQUE	41
	THE ART OF FORGETTING	66
4	<i>His World</i>	75
	PEOPLE AND THINGS	75
	WORDS	83
5	<i>His Mind</i>	95
	HIS STRONG POINTS	96
	HIS WEAK POINTS	111
6	<i>His Control of Behavior</i>	137
	THE OBJECTIVE DATA	137
	A FEW WORDS ABOUT MAGIC	144
7	<i>His Personality</i>	149

---

THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

---

# 1

## *Introduction*

This brief account of a man's vast memory has quite a history behind it. For almost thirty years the author had an opportunity systematically to observe a man whose remarkable memory was one of the keenest the literature on the subject has ever described.

During this time the enormous amount of material which was assembled made it possible not only to explore the main patterns and devices of the man's memory (which for all practical purposes was inexhaustible), but to delineate the distinct personality features this extraordinary person revealed.

---

## THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

### 4

Unlike other psychologists who have done research on people with an exceptional gift for memory, the author did not confine himself to measuring the capacity and stability of the subject's memory, or to describing the devices used by the latter to recall and reproduce material. He was far more interested in studying certain other issues: What effect does a remarkable capacity for memory have on other major aspects of personality, on an individual's habits of thought and imagination, on his behavior and personality development? What changes occur in a person's inner world, in his relationships with others, in his very life style when one element of his psychic makeup, his memory, develops to such an uncommon degree that it begins to alter every other aspect of his activity?

Such an approach to the study of psychic phenomena is hardly typical of scientific psychology, which deals for the most part with sensation and perception, attention and memory, thinking and emotion, but only rarely considers how the entire structure of an individual's personality may hinge on the development of one of these features of psychic activity.

Nonetheless, this approach has been in use for some time. It is the accepted method in clinical medicine, where the thoughtful physician is never interested merely in the course of a disease he hap-

pens to be studying at the moment, but tries to determine what effect a disturbance of one particular process has on other organic processes; how changes in the latter (which ultimately have one root cause) alter the activity of the entire organism, thus giving rise to the total *picture of disease*, to what medicine commonly terms a *syndrome*.

The study of syndromes, however, need not be restricted to clinical medicine. By the same token, one can analyze how an unusually developed feature of psychic makeup produces changes, which are causally related to it, in the entire structure of psychic life, in the total personality. In the latter instance, too, we would be dealing with "syndromes" having one causal factor, except that these would be psychological rather than clinical syndromes.

It is precisely with the emergence of such a syndrome, one produced by an exceptional memory, that this book is concerned. The author hopes that by reading it psychologists may be prompted to investigate and describe other psychological syndromes: the distinct personality features which emerge when there is heightened development of an individual's sensitivity or imagination, his power of observation or capacity for abstract thought, or the will power he exerts in the pursuit of a particular idea. This would mark the beginning of a concrete

---

## THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

6

(but nonetheless scientifically valid) psychology.

That an analysis of an exceptional memory, of the role it played in shaping an individual's psychic makeup, should initiate this type of research has certain distinct advantages. Memory studies, which had been at a standstill for so many years, have once again become a subject of vital research, leading to rapid growth in our knowledge of this particular phenomenon. This progress is bound up with the development of a new branch of technology, bionics, which has forced us to take a closer look at every possible indication of how the human memory operates: the devices it uses as a basis for the mental "notes" people take on their impressions of things; the "readings" the mind takes of memory traces that have been retained. At the same time, recent work on memory is related to advances in our knowledge made possible through current theories of the brain, its physiological and biochemical structure.

Nevertheless, in this book we will not be drawing either on information acquired in these fields or on the vast literature available on memory. This book is devoted to the study of *one man*, and the author will venture no further than what observations on this remarkable "experiment of nature" themselves provided.

---

# 2

## *The Beginning of the Research*

The actual beginning of this account dates back to the 1920's, when I had only recently begun to do work in psychology. It was then that a man came to my laboratory who asked me to test his memory.

At the time the man (let us designate him S.) was a newspaper reporter who had come to my laboratory at the suggestion of the paper's editor. Each morning the editor would meet with the staff and hand out assignments for the day—lists of places he wanted covered, information to be obtained in each. The list of addresses and instructions was usually fairly long, and the editor noted with some surprise that S. never took any notes.

---

## THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

### 8

He was about to reproach the reporter for being inattentive when, at his urging, S. repeated the entire assignment word for word. Curious to learn more about how the man operated, the editor began questioning S. about his memory. But S. merely countered with amazement: Was there really anything unusual about his remembering everything he'd been told? Wasn't that the way other people operated? The idea that he possessed certain particular qualities of memory which distinguished him from others struck him as incomprehensible.

The editor sent him to the psychology laboratory to have some studies done on his memory, and thus it was that I found myself confronted with the man.

At the time S. was just under thirty. The information I got on his family background was that his father owned a bookstore, that his mother, an elderly Jewish woman, was quite well-read, and that of his numerous brothers and sisters (all of them conventional, well-balanced types) some were gifted individuals. There was no incidence of mental illness in the family.

S. had grown up in a small Jewish community and had attended elementary school there. Later, when it was discovered that he had musical ability, he was enrolled in a music school, where he studied in the hope that he might some day become a professional violinist. However, after an ear disease

had left his hearing somewhat impaired, he realized he could hardly expect to have a successful career as a musician. During the time he spent looking for the sort of work that would best suit him he happened to visit the newspaper, where he subsequently began work as a reporter.

S. had no clear idea what he wanted out of life, and his plans were fairly indefinite. The impression he gave was of a rather ponderous and at times timid person who was puzzled at having been sent to the psychology laboratory. As I mentioned, he wasn't aware of any peculiarities in himself and couldn't conceive of the idea that his memory differed in some way from other people's. He passed on his editor's request to me with some degree of confusion and waited curiously to see what, if anything, the research might turn up. Thus began a relationship of almost thirty years, filled with experiments, discussions, and correspondence.

When I began my study of S. it was with much the same degree of curiosity psychologists generally have at the outset of research, hardly with the hope that the experiments would offer anything of particular note. However, the results of the first tests were enough to change my attitude and to leave me, the experimenter, rather than my subject, both embarrassed and perplexed.

I gave S. a series of words, then numbers, then

---

## THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

10

letters, reading them to him slowly or presenting them in written form. He read or listened attentively and then repeated the material exactly as it had been presented. I increased the number of elements in each series, giving him as many as thirty, fifty, or even seventy words or numbers, but this, too, presented no problem for him. He did not need to commit any of the material to memory; if I gave him a series of words or numbers, which I read slowly and distinctly, he would listen attentively, sometimes ask me to stop and enunciate a word more clearly, or, if in doubt whether he had heard a word correctly, would ask me to repeat it. Usually during an experiment he would close his eyes or stare into space, fixing his gaze on one point; when the experiment was over, he would ask that we pause while he went over the material in his mind to see if he had retained it. Thereupon, without another moment's pause, he would reproduce the series that had been read to him.

The experiment indicated that he could reproduce a series in reverse order—from the end to the beginning—just as simply as from start to finish; that he could readily tell me which word followed another in a series, or reproduce the word which happened to precede one I'd name. He would pause for a minute, as though searching for the

word, but immediately after would be able to answer my questions and generally made no mistakes.

It was of no consequence to him whether the series I gave him contained meaningful words or nonsense syllables, numbers or sounds; whether they were presented orally or in writing. All he required was that there be a three-to-four-second pause between each element in the series, and he had no difficulty reproducing whatever I gave him.

As the experimenter, I soon found myself in a state verging on utter confusion. An increase in the length of a series led to no noticeable increase in difficulty for S., and I simply had to admit that the capacity of his memory *had no distinct limits*; that I had been unable to perform what one would think was the simplest task a psychologist can do: measure the capacity of an individual's memory. I arranged a second and then a third session with S.; these were followed by a series of sessions, some of them days and weeks apart, others separated by a period of several years.

But these later sessions only further complicated my position as experimenter, for it appeared that there was no limit either to the *capacity* of S.'s memory or to the *durability of the traces he retained*. Experiments indicated that he had no difficulty reproducing any lengthy series of words whatever,

---

## THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

12

even though these had originally been presented *to* him a week, a month, a year, or even many years earlier. In fact, some of these experiments designed to test his retention were performed (without his being given any warning) fifteen or sixteen years after the session in which he had originally recalled the words. Yet invariably they were successful. During these test sessions S. would sit with his eyes closed, pause, then comment: "Yes, yes . . . This was a series you gave me once when we were in your apartment . . . You were sitting at the table and I in the rocking chair . . . You were wearing a gray suit and you looked at me like this . . . Now, then, I can see you saying . . ." And with that he would reel off the series precisely as I had given it to him at the earlier session. If one takes into account that S. had by then become a well-known mnemonist, who had to remember hundreds and thousands of series, the feat seems even more remarkable.

All this meant that I had to alter my plan and concentrate less on any attempt to *measure* the man's memory than on some way to provide a *qualitative analysis* of it, to describe the *psychological aspects of its structure*. Subsequently I undertook to explore another problem, as I said, to do a close study of the peculiarities that seemed an

inherent part of the psychology of this exceptional mnemonist.

I devoted the balance of my research to these two tasks, the results of which I will try to present systematically here, though many years have passed since my work with S.

---

# 3

## *His Memory*

This study of S.'s memory was begun in the mid-1920's, when he was still working as a newspaper reporter. It continued for many years, during which S. changed jobs several times, finally becoming a professional mnemonist who gave performances of memory feats. Although the procedures S. used to recall material retained their original pattern throughout this time, they gradually became enriched with new devices, so that ultimately they presented quite a different picture psychologically.

In this section we will consider the peculiar features his memory exhibited at successive stages.

- [\*read Atomic Charges, Bond Properties, and Molecular Energies book\*](#)
- [Broken Windows, Broken Business: How the Smallest Remedies Reap the Biggest Rewards pdf](#)
- [read online Take Six Girls: The Lives of the Mitford Sisters](#)
- [\*\*read online Ranger \(Exodus: Empires at War, Book 5\)\*\*](#)
  
- <http://serazard.com/lib/L-Interpr--tation-du-r--ve.pdf>
- <http://www.khoi.dk/?books/Broken-Windows--Broken-Business--How-the-Smallest-Remedies-Reap-the-Biggest-Rewards.pdf>
- <http://serazard.com/lib/Take-Six-Girls--The-Lives-of-the-Mitford-Sisters.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Ravel.pdf>