

FOUR UNPUBLISHED LETTERS FROM KARL KNORRE TO VLADIMIR DAHL

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In memory of Ulrich von Knorre (1931-2011)

Origin of the letters

Fortuitous circumstances enabled the author to discover four hitherto unknown letters from Karl Knorre to Vladimir Dahl. After the publication of her French translation of the first biography ever dedicated to her ancestor, astronomer Karl Knorre [1], she was contacted by two of her German cousins, Erik von Knorre and, more particularly, by Ulrich von Knorre, holder of personal archives originally belonging to their common ancestor. Karl Knorre (1801-1883), whose parents came from Saxony, was born in Dorpat, Livonia (today Tartu, Estonia). He studied astronomy at Dorpat/Tartu University under the guidance of famous astronomer F.G.W. Struve, who recommended him in 1820 for the position of naval astronomer in Nikolayev in Southern Ukraine, near the Black Sea. After he obtained his pension in 1871, K. Knorre moved to Berlin and before his death left all his personal papers, souvenirs and decorations to his youngest son Georg. All things passed on from generation to generation down to Ulrich. As they learnt that the author was preparing a book on the dynasty of Knorre astronomers [2], the two cousins were kind enough to make part of these archives available to her, namely four notebooks containing Karl Knorre's private correspondence. One can imagine the author's surprise when she identified in three of these notebooks four letters addressed to famous Russian lexicographer Vladimir Dahl (1801-1872), the author of the monumental "Defining dictionary of the Great-Russian living language" [3].

These letters, respectively dated August 15. 1855, March 16. 1856, November 6. 1864 and January 15. 1865, belong to three notebooks corresponding to two different periods distant from each other by almost ten years. Each of the three notebooks bears its own title, depending on the current Russian situation [4]. On the first one, written during the Crimean War, Karl Knorre's name is not even mentioned. His sole function is used as a means of identification : "Private correspondence of the astronomer to the Black Sea Fleet and Ports Headquarters". On the second notebook, written after the Russian defeat and subsequent

neutralization of the Black Sea, Karl Knorre only writes his name and place of residence : “Private correspondence of Karl Knorre, Nikolayev”. Finally on the third notebook, he mentions his name and function at the observatory, without any reference to the Navy : “Private correspondence of Karl Knorre, the astronomer of Nikolayev observatory”. Unfortunately, all notebooks concerning the intermediate period are missing. They may have been destroyed by bombings during WW2 in Berlin, as was Karl Knorre’s grave in St. Thomas cemetery on Hermannstr. in the Neukölln district of Berlin.

Friendly relationship between Karl Knorre and Vladimir Dahl

Karl Knorre and Vladimir Dahl became friends in 1821, when young midshipman Dahl was attending courses in practical astronomy taught by Knorre at the Nikolayev Navigation School. Both aged 21, they immediately felt sympathy for each other. Everything brought them together : the same year of birth (1801), their common German origin and culture with German as native language and Lutheran faith as religion, a similar social and intellectual background, a same passion for literature and poetry, as well as the same sharply ironic turn of mind. But fate separated them in 1824, when Dahl was dismissed from the ranks of the Black Sea Fleet and transferred to Kronstadt, seat of the Baltic Sea Fleet, in circumstances which the author recalled elsewhere [5]. The four letters presented here show the enduring friendship between these two men over four decades, in spite of their geographic separation and all sorts of hardships affecting them.

The letters, written in neat German Gothic script, contain some crossed out but still readable phrases, appearing here in brackets, as well as some margin corrections and additions. These are the drafts of letters effectively sent to Vladimir Dahl to two different places of residence, respectively Nijni-Novgorod and Moscow.

Karl Knorre’s situation in 1855

By 1855 Karl Knorre had become a well established astronomer, distinguished for thirty years’ impeccable service at the head of the Nikolayev naval observatory. He was also well-known by his peers abroad for his numerous articles published in the *Astronomische Nachrichten*. In 1848 he had been elected foreign member of the Royal Astronomical Society. As to his family life, however, fate did not spare him. Twice widowed in 1832 and 1851, he remarried for a third time in 1852 in order to entrust his third wife with the responsibility of educating the youngest among his fourteen children. Crushed by his family burden and constant money problems, he was also overloaded with multiple professional obligations

without the help of any qualified assistant. Exiled and cut off from the civilized world in Nikolayev which was then only a rear base of the Black Sea Fleet with the seat of its admiralty, its Navigation School and naval dockyards, Knorre maintained an abundant correspondence with European scientific circles, members of his family and friends scattered far away.

Vladimir Dahl's situation in 1855

Unlike his friend's linear path, Dahl's career looked like a broken line which deserves to be briefly summed up. After his dismissal from Nikolayev, he stayed in Kronstadt for two years, then resigned from the Navy and registered at Dorpat/Tartu Medical School where he studied from 1826 to 1829 on a State scholarship. He specialized in surgery and obtained the title of doctor of medicine. Then he participated in war operations against Turkey and Poland from 1829 to 1831 as an army doctor in a field hospital [6]. After the wars, he practised medicine for about eight months in a Saint-Petersburg army hospital and was arrested in early November 1832 for having published under the pen name of Cossack Vladimir from Lugansk some "Tales coming from oral popular tradition" [7]. Lugan' (now Lugansk) was a small place in Southern Ukraine where Dahl was born. The success of his work had reached the ears of the secret police which judged it offending for the authorities and the army. Dahl was released on the same day in consideration of his brilliant service record but compelled to accept a new assignment far away from the capital, in Orenburg on the river Ural, i.e. at the gates of Siberia. There he was appointed official in charge of special missions to military governor V.A. Perovsky. Dahl took advantage of his posting for sampling a remarkable collection of local flora and fauna. For this work he was elected in 1838 member-correspondent of the Saint-Petersburg Academy of Science in the department of natural sciences.

In 1841 Dahl returned to Saint-Petersburg where he was appointed secretary to the minister of State Properties, L.A. Perovsky, brother of the Orenburg governor. Dahl quickly became the right-hand man of the minister but, as he never ceased writing and publishing works with success since his youth, he finally attracted the minister's wrath upon him for having published a story criticizing the lethargy of Russian administration. He was forced to burn his own manuscripts and to accept a new assignment to a lower position in the province - office director of State Properties in Nijni-Novgorod. He was still living there when he received the first two letters examined here. Concerning his family life, he was then a

remarried widower with two children from his first wife, among them Lev (Leo) mentioned below, and three daughters from his second wife.

War situation in Russia in August 1855

In August 1855 tsar Alexander II, who had come to the throne five months earlier, was at the head of a country at war, as a consequence of his predecessor's policy. At the Vienna Conference of August 8. 1854, Nicholas I had rejected the claims presented by Austria, England and France concerning questions of sovereignty over the Danube and the Straits. In reprisal to this rebuff, a landing of Anglo-French-Turkish troops took place on September 14 at Eupatoria on the west coast of Crimea. Therefore, Russia was confronted on the battle field with a triple coalition [8]. According to news coming from the front, operations were turning to a disaster on the Russian side. The Russian defeat at Alma in September 1854 opened to allied forces the way to Sevastopol, the base of the Russian Fleet in the Black Sea and main objective of the coalition. The allied immediately laid siege around the city. In spite of two attempts in October of the same year at Balaklava and Inkerman, the Russians did not succeed in breaking the enemy ring. In 1855 Sevastopol had become a real hell. Men were starving, infected with cholera and typhus, they died like flies when they were not hit by enemy fire. During the summer of 1855, Gorchakov, commander in chief of Russian troops in Crimea, who wanted to put an end to this unbearable situation, had numerous troops sent from Russia as reinforcements [9]. But for lack of land communication routes, ill-trained and ill-equipped troops had to walk all their way through vast steppe territories and, consequently, reached their destination in a state of complete exhaustion. On August 15, i.e. precisely on the day when Karl Knorre wrote the first of our four letters, Gorchakov had massed huge infantry, cavalry and artillery forces and was about to launch a decisive attack along the river Chernaya.

The Crimean war as reported in Letter N° 1 of August 15, 1855

In that period of collective anguish, K. Knorre and Vl. Dahl, both recognized scientists in their own fields, were driven to read future by means of divination methods, namely turning tables. Apparently, their personal views on the subject were quite different. But it did not prevent them to practise this activity, each on his own, and to draw out of it equally gloomy prospects. Here is what K. Knorre writes on Page 1, lines 11-15 and Page 2, lines 1-4 (last sentence written in the left margin) :

„Faraday's Versuchen über das Tischrücken sind mir aus folgender Schrift : Table turning & table talking, second ed.

*with Prof. Faraday's experiments & explanations, London,
Henry Vicretolly, Gough square, Fleet street, bekannt geworden.
Sie sind, wie alles was dieser große Mann leistet, //
schlagend. Was Du schreibst scheint mir doch nicht wichtig
genug, um meine Meinung zu ändern. Meine Tische haben es
übrigens an wunderbaren Prophezeiungen eben so
wenig fehlen lassen als die Deinigen. Sie sind eben so pünktlich eingetroffen wie
diejenige mit welcher die Bibel schließt.“*

(Faraday's experiments in table turning are known to me through the following paper : Table turning & table talking, second ed. with Prof. Faraday's experiments & explanations, London, Henry Vicretolly, Gough square, Fleet street. They are striking, just like all that this great man produces. What you wrote to me does not seem important enough to make me change my opinion. Moreover, my tables do not lack in wonderful prophecies, just like yours. They came out even as precise as the one ending the Bible.)

In other words, the experiments of the two friends with turning tables give the same answer to their anguished question on the outcome of the Crimean war : they both forecast a disaster for Russia. As a positive scientist, Karl Knorre favours and recommends Faraday's mechanist view, explaining that the phenomenon of turning tables is due to unconscious movements agitating hand muscles [10]. As to Vladimir Dahl, he seems guided by spiritualist ideas. It is known that Dahl was an adept of spiritualism and studied the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist, inventor and mystic [11]. Karl Knorre, far from supporting these views, warns his friend that he finds his arguments inadequate and advise him to read Faraday's writings. Clearly none of them will convince the other. But the main thing for both is to agree on the actual meaning of the signals emitted by the turning tables. It does not matter much whether those signals come from the next world or just reflect a deep unconscious foresight of the impending tragedy, as in the Apocalypse.

Let us note that Karl Knorre is just alluding to the final chapter of the Bible and immediately adds that he cannot express himself more specifically on current events for fear of censorship (Page 2, lines 5-8) :

*„Von politischen und Kriegsnachrichten muß ich leider
schweigen, aus Gründen, die Dir selbst am besten be-
kannt sind. Ich bin Vater von 14 Kindern, und habe
keine Lust, meine Stellung zu gefährden.“*

(Unfortunately I have to keep silent on political and war news for reasons well known to you. I am the father of 14 children and have no desire to endanger my position.)

Vladimir Dahl knew only too well the ruthlessness of censors from his own sadly repeated experience with his writings. However, the omnipresent threat of repression affecting not only publications but also private correspondence, does not prevent Karl Knorre from delivering local news revealing the disarray among Nikolayev population (Page 4, lines 1-2) :

*„Halb Sewastopol ist hierher geflüchtet ; die Quartiere und
Lebensmittelpreise sind un[geheuer]erschwinglich...“*

(Half Sevastopol has taken refuge here. Rents and food have become quite prohibitive...)

We learn that before the final decisive battle, half of Sevastopol inhabitants - wounded and sick soldiers, civilians - had fled from the besieged port and taken refuge in Nikolayev, causing an incredible soaring of food and rent prices. The hell of Sevastopol had moved to peaceful Nikolayev with its attendant misery, epidemics and shortages. But Karl Knorre avoided giving more details likely to fall under the inquisitive eyes of censors.

Post-war period according to letter N° 2 of March 16, 1856

Sevastopol had finally fallen into the hands of allied forces in September 1855 and was under their occupation when the letter was written. Besides, in January 1856 tsar Alexander II had accepted to enter into peace negotiations. Delegates from Russia and European powers were then attending a conference organized in Paris to discuss peace conditions defined in “Four Points”. According to Point 3, the allied demanded from Russia the neutralization of the Black Sea and its coastal areas. Consequently, Russia would lose her Black Sea fleet and naval dockyards. The international press reported fierce bargaining between delegates on each point of the treaty until the very end of the conference. Letter N° 2 was written hardly two weeks before the signature of the Paris Treaty on March 30, 1856.

For that reason, even though he welcomed peace, Karl Knorre expressed his bitterness and anxiety at the prospect of conditions which would deprive Nikolayev naval observatory of its essential function in relation to the Black Sea fleet (Page 3, lines 20-25) :

*„Es ist wahr, uns lächelt [allerdings] der Frieden – aber es ist ein
ironisches Lächeln ! Wenn wir keine Flotte mehr haben sollen,
was wird dann aus Nikolajew werden ? Was aus meiner
Sternwarte ? Wo wird man uns arme Teufel hinschustern ?
Bei meiner großen Familie, die sich bald noch vergrößern
wird, blicke ich sorgenvoll in die Zukunft...“*

(It is true that Peace is [nevertheless] smiling to us – but it is an ironic smile ! If we are not permitted to have a Navy any longer, what will be the fate of Nikolayev ? Of my observatory ? What will they do with us, poor wretches ? With my big family, soon to be again increased, I look into the future with anguish...)

We can hear his distress not only as naval astronomer threatened in his position, but also as a father having to support his large family in troubled times. But that time, his family did not effectively increase for on April 1856, his third wife Emilie, born von Gavel, gave birth to a son named Georg who died on July 31 of the same year. This loss had been preceded by an even more devastating bereavement, the death of his 18-year-old, artistically talented daughter Emma, a victim of the typhus epidemic brought by sick soldiers accommodated at the observatory.

Who was responsible for the defeat ?

Fearing for his own position and for his family's future, Karl Knorre was also an angry man, confiding to his close friend his intimate thoughts on who was responsible for the Russian defeat. Let us read his biting words on Page 2, lines 24-30 and Page 3, lines 1-2 :

„ ... *Nicht die überlegene Kriegskunst der Feinde, unsere eigene Verdorbenheit, die Faulniß unserer Verwaltung hat uns ins Unglück gebracht. Wir haben unsere Armee verloren, weil bei uns unter 100 Beamten 99 Halunken u. Spitzbuben sind, deren unfläthiges Maul v. Patriotism[us] über[fließt]sprudelt, während sie [ihr ganzes Leben hindurch nichts] nie etwas anderes// [weiter] gethan haben als ihr Vaterland zu bestehlen, ja auch im Angesicht des Feindes ihr dieses Handwerk fortsetzen.“*

(We have been brought into misery not by the superior military art of the enemy, but by our own corruption, the laziness of our administration, because in our country among 100 civil servants 99 are rascals and crooks, whose dirty faces are dripping with patriotism, whereas [all their lives long] they never did anything else than stealing their own fatherland, even continuing that activity in front of the enemy.)

Earlier in his letter Karl Knorre already identified the main cause of the defeat, i.e. the typhus epidemic, the ravages of which he could observe by himself and which he ascribed to the negligence and corruption prevailing in the Russian army and administration (Page 1, lines 12-17) :

„ ... *Die Seuche raßt
besonders die armen Milizen weg, die hier zu Hunderten
täglich sterben, so daß man sie nicht mehr einzeln
begrabt, sondern maßenweise in großen Gruben wie
nach einer Schlacht. Alle verfügbaren Gebäude sind in
Lazarethe verwandelt, und dennoch fehlt es an Platz.* “

(... The epidemic is raging, especially among the poor soldiers who die here daily by the hundreds, so that they are not buried separately but collectively in gigantic pits, like after a battle. All available buildings are turned into hospitals, and nevertheless there is not enough room.)

Then he openly accused the hypocritical State system to be guilty of the collective tragedy which happened and hit him in his own family (Page 1, lines 17-31) :

„... *Vor Kurzem kam eine Commission von Aertzten,
unter ihnen Dieterichs, aus Odessa, um die Ursachen d.
großen Sterblichkeit zu untersuchen. Immer das alte
Lügensystem ! Jedermann weiß, und am besten d. Ernann[te]
der Commission, daß die schlechte Verpflegung, die
Veruntreuungen der Verwaltung die Krankheit erzeugt
haben, und doch nimmt man die Miene an, als ob ihre
Ursachen so schwer [zu errathen] zu finden wären, daß dazu die
vereinten Bemühungen ausgezeichneter Aerzte bedingt.
Die Commission hat einen [sehr schön stilisirten] geistreichen Bericht
gemacht, der als schützbare Material zu den Acten
gelegt worden ist, und Alles bleibt beim Altem. Wenn die
Seuche endlich aufhört, weil sie nichts mehr zum Morden findet,
dann wird es gewiß an glänzenden Berichten über die
erfolgreiche Bekämpfung der Krankheit nicht fehlen.* “

(Recently a committee of physicians, among them Dieterichs, came from Odessa in order to investigate the causes of the great mortality. Always the same old system of lies ! Anyone knows, and particularly the above mentioned member of the committee, that poor food, [due to] misappropriations by the administration are at the origin of the disease ; however, everyone pretends to believe that its causes are so difficult to [guess] find out that the joint efforts of distinguished physicians are needed. The committee wrote a [very stylish] witty report which serves as a protective material for acts and everything stays unchanged. When the epidemics stops, because it finds nobody left to be murdered, then it is certain that brilliant reports on the successful fight against the disease will not be lacking.)

According to Karl Knorre, lie and manipulation were the usual instruments of authorities when they had to deal with situations which they did not even try to control. In the medical committee dispatched from Odessa to investigate the causes of abnormal mortality, the only member he mentioned was his own brother-in-law, Dr. Michael von Dieterichs, whom he considered to be in league with the official system.

Worries about Leo Dahl's fate

Even though he had been so far spared from the aftermath of war, Vladimir Dahl was deeply concerned about his son Leo's fate. From the beginning of the Crimean war, Leo or Lev [12] had volunteered for joining troops fighting on the front. Opening his letter N° 2, Karl Knorre tries to comfort his friend by reporting the visit he received from Leo a couple of months before. It seems that the young man was on his way to Crimea (Page 1, lines 4-8):

„ ... *Ich habe mich sehr gefreut, in Deinem Leo eine so kräftige und unverdorbene Natur zu finden. Solche Erscheinungen sind um so wohlthuerender, als die Hauptstadt uns fast nur alberne eitle Gecken schickt, Früchte die durch und durch verfault sind, bevor sie reif wurden.*“

(I was delighted to find in your Leo a so strong and uncorrupted character. Such phenomena are all the more comforting as the capital sends us almost exclusively stupid, frivolous dandies, types of fruit that are rotten to the core before becoming ripe.)

[added in the margin] :

„*Er versprach, und während d. Winters wiederholt z. besuch,, hat aber bis jetzt sich nicht blicken lassen.*“

(He promised and several times to visit me during the winter, but I have not seen him up to now.) [March 16. 1856]

[continued on lines 8-11] :

„ *Gott behüte den armen Sohn vor [der Seuche] dem Typhus, der auch dort wo Dein Sohn steht, furchtbar wüthen soll, und den jungen starken Naturen bekanntlich am verderblichsten ist*“

May God preserve the poor son from [the epidemic] typhus which must be terribly raging where your son is and, as it is known, which is most fatal to young strong beings.)

[added in the margin as a reminder of his daughter Emma's death] :

„ *wovon ich selbst in meiner Familie ein so trauriges Beispiel gehabt habe.*“

(as I had such a sad example in my own family).

Karl Knorre knew Leo Dahl above all as a close friend of his eldest son Theodor. Both young men just spent four years together studying architecture at the imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Saint-Petersburg. During the first year, Vladimir Dahl had even offered room and board to Theodor, before being assigned to Nijni-Novgorod where he was still living in 1856. Evidently, when he wrote Letter N° 2, Karl Knorre had no idea of what became of Leo since his visit to the observatory at an unspecified date. Fortunately, Theodor Knorre's memoirs [13] bring some more detailed information on the subject when he tells how he was separated from his friend Leo by the Crimean war :

„Der Krimm-Krieg war ausgebrochen und Leo Dahl, vom glühendsten Patriotismus beseelt, hatte sich entschlossen gegen Franzosen und Engländer mitzukämpfen. Er wurde als Junker (Fähnrich) unter die Kaiserlichen Scharfschützen eingereiht; hat den Marsch von Petersburg bis Odeßa glücklich ausgehalten (im Winter) ; ist aber dort vom Typhus befallen worden, so daß er wahrscheinlich ein trauriges und ruhmloses Ende gefunden hätte, wenn nicht mein Onkel, der Arzt Michel Dieterichs, sich seiner angenommen und ihm sorgfältige Pflege angedeihen laßen ? Nach der Genesung Dahl's war der Friede bereits geschlossen und mein Freund Leo konnte seine Studien der Architektur wieder aufnehmen.“

(The Crimean War broke out and Leo Dahl, prompted by the most ardent patriotism, decided to fight against the French and the British. He was enlisted as standard bearer among the imperial skirmishers ; he stood up well to the march from St. Petersburg to Odessa (in the winter); but there he caught typhus and would have probably died in sad and obscure circumstances, if my uncle, Doctor Michel Dieterichs, had not taken him in hand and let him receive attentive medical care. When Dahl recovered, peace had been already signed and my friend Leo could resume his studies in architecture.)

Here we find a slight discrepancy with Karl Knorre's report on Leo's visit to Nikolayev. Odessa was not mentioned and Leo appeared to be in good health at the time of his visit to Nikolayev. A look at Leo's biographical note [12], tells us that Leo officially served in the Russian armed forces from December 1855 to April 1856. It means that he might have visited Karl Knorre by late December 1855 or early January 1856. It is not clear whether he walked on his way to Crimea or, most probably, returned to his regiment stationed in Odessa, i.e. less than 100 miles away. But the fact is that he soon caught typhus and was sent to a hospital in Odessa, where Dr. Michael von Dieterichs took care of him and saved his life. One should note that Theodor Knorre wrote his memoirs in 1901 at the age of 70, almost fifty years after the reported events, which explains some chronological inaccuracies. But most probably, the main enemy that Leo had to fight was typhus. In any case, Karl Knorre's worries about Leo

Dahl's health were perfectly founded. At the moment when the astronomer wrote his letter N° 2 of March 16. 1856, Leo was probably lying on a hospital bed in Odessa under the efficient care of Dr. Michael von Dieterichs.

Medicine, a major theme of disagreement

Medicine was a major theme of disagreement between Karl Knorre and Vladimir Dahl. The astronomer had developed an original attitude in this respect since the death in 1832 of his first wife Elisabeth who, at the age of 21, succumbed to septicaemia following ill-fated medical handling supposed to prevent a miscarriage. The fact was reported in his memoirs by Elisabeth's only child, Theodor. The latter added that his father henceforth forbade to call a doctor in his absence, if his children happened to become sick. He preferred to see them on his return "dead from disease, rather than poisoned by medicine". Theodor added : „*Diese Ansicht war seinem Jugendfreund W. Dahl wohlbekannt. Als ich im Cholerajahr 1848 im Hause Dahl's lebte und erkrankt war, bin ich homöopathisch behandelt worden. Nach meiner Genesung berichtete Vlad. Iv. Vater darüber und entschuldigte seinen Entschluß, mir homöopathisch Medizin gegeben zu haben, mit der großen Entfernung Petersburgs von Nicolajeff, die ihn gehindert habe, erst die Einwilligung dazu von Vater einzuholen. Vater antwortete : „So weit gehen mein Haß und meine Verachtung der Arzneiwißenschaften nicht, daß ich nicht erlauben sollte Decilliontheile zu nehmen.“*

(This opinion was well known to his old friend V. Dahl. During the cholera epidemic of 1848, while I was living at Dahl's house and lay ill, I was treated through homeopathic means. After my recovery Vlad[imir] Iv.[anovych Dahl] informed Father about it and apologized for having decided to give me homeopathic medicine, arguing that the great distance of St. Petersburg from Nikolayev had prevented him from asking Father's permission. Father answered : "However strong my hatred and contempt of medical sciences are, I do not go as far as to forbid the intake of infinitesimal particles.")

In other words, Karl Knorre „forgave” his long-time friend for saving his son's life by using homeopathic means on the ground that it involved only infinitesimal doses ! As a matter of fact, Vl. Dahl had been initiated to homeopathy in 1832, while he was working as a junior doctor at a Saint-Petersburg army hospital. He became fascinated by this new type of medicine which he adopted with enthusiasm and try to popularize [14].

Karl Knorre found in his own health problems examples of harm caused by medicine and a justification of his dislike for it. He did not hesitate to confide his trouble to his friend Dr. Vl. Dahl in Letter N° 1 of August 15. 1855, page 3, lines 11-24 :

„ *Einen großen Theil*

*des vergangenen Winters habe ich im Bette zugebracht.
 Ich leide an der Wassersucht der unteren Extremitäten.
 Die erste Spur dieser Krankheit zeigte sich schon im [Winter
 von] 1824 [auch 1825], wo sie mich zwang, meine Reise aufzuschieben.
 Aehnliche Anfälle habe ich seitdem [mehrere] noch einigemal gehabt,
 immer mit freien Zwischenräumen von mehreren
 Jahren. Im letzten Winter wurde es aber arg damit.
 Medicinirt habe ich [wie Du Dir denken kannst], gar nicht ;
 ich bedaure nur, in früheren Jahren die dummen Rathschläge
 der Aerzte gläubig hingenommen und pünktlich befolgt, und dadurch das
 Uebel verschlimmert zu haben. Jetzt lebe ich größtentheils v.
 Milch und befinde mich sehr wohl dabei. Die Geschwulst der
 Füße nimmt fortwährend ab.“*

(I spent most of last winter lying in bed. I suffer from dropsy in the lower extremities. The first signs of this disease appeared already in [the winter of] 1824 [and 1825], when they forced me to postpone my journey [to Europe]. Since then I had [some] a number of similar bouts, always at intervals of several years. But last winter it got worse. [As you can imagine,] I did not at all resort to medicine ; my only regret is that in earlier years I credulously accepted and strictly followed the stupid advice of doctors, which made the evil worse. Now I live mainly on milk and find myself very well with it. Feet swelling is progressively decreasing.)

Only a close friend like Dahl would not be offended by such words accusing his colleagues of giving foolish and damaging advice. Through his personal case Karl Knorre wanted to show that self-prescribed diet measures are enough to solve a medical problem smoothly. Such a testimony was not likely to shock Dahl who was himself interested in natural and traditional medicine about which he published several articles. From the last quoted excerpt we learn that Karl Knorre was suffering from recurrent accesses of dropsy, i.e. oedemas in his lower limbs and that this acute discomfort caused him to postpone the date of his departure in 1825 on his great European journey which lasted for two years, from June 1825 to August 23. 1827. During that period Karl Knorre wrote 83 letters to his master and friend Wilhelm Struve, then director of Dorpat/Tartu Observatory [15]. It is interesting to note that in his correspondence Knorre reported a severe illness which stroke him in London from October 1825 to May 1826, but never mentioned any access of dropsy during his stay in Europe.

Shared passion for science and technological advancement

Even though Karl Knorre and Vladimir Dahl disagreed on some subjects, they shared an equal passion for science and technological advancement. To their minds prompted by an all-embracing curiosity, every aspect of knowledge was precious. Karl Knorre was happy to give his friend the references and contents of any scientific novelty he happened to learn of. In Letter N° 1 of August 15 1855, we already saw that he advised Vl. Dahl to read Faraday's article about his experiments with turning tables. He ended the same letter by announcing two technological improvements : the construction of a telegraphic link to Simferopol and the invention of a new type of sealed envelopes (Page 4, lines 2-9) :

„ ... Neben den vielen
 Leiden des Krieges will ich aber [doch] auch eine Wohltat
 nicht vergeßen, die wie ihm verdanken – den elektrischen
 Telegrafen, der bald bis Sympheropol fertig seyn wird,
 [Ich habe ihn schon] und deßen Benutzung auch dem Publ.
 für Geld u. gute Worte freisteht. Kannst Du schon
 die lack- u. feuersparenden Couverts, deren
 eins diesen Brief [umhüllt] einschließt ?“

(Outside the many sufferings caused by the war, I will never forget one benefit due to it : the electrical telegraph which will soon be finished up to Sevastopol [I have it already] and the use of which is open to the public in exchange for money and good words. Have you already seen the type of envelop without heated wax, like the one [covering] containing this letter ?)

At the end of Letter N° 2 of March 16. 1856, Karl Knorre broached a fully different subject, called nowadays dendrology, which he thought interesting for Vl. Dahl as a botanist. He evidently knew that, at the request of authorities, Dahl had prepared and published in 1849 a botanical handbook for the use of Russian military schools [16]. Therefore, he was pleased to inform his friend of the newly published works by German scientist Hermann Nördlinger on wooden cross-sections, described in detail on Page 3, lines 5-20, including additions in the left margin and between lines :

„ Kennst Du Nördlinger's Holzquerschnitte ? (Querschnitte von 100
 Holzarten (Stuttgart u. Tübingen bis jetzt sind
 2 Bände erschienen 1852 u. 1856, deren jeder 100 Holzarten umfaßt).
 Sind sie Dir unbekannt, so rathe ich Dir sehr, sie
 Dir anzuschaffen. – Sie sind einzig schön, u.
 werden Dich als Botaniker besonders intereßiren. Es [sind]
 ist eine instruktive Sammlung von 200 Holzarten im Raume weniger Quadratzoile,

[Holzblättchen] Schnitte, dünn wie Goldschlägerhaut, senkrecht auf die Richtung der Adern, [sie] sind so auf Papier geklebt, daß man sie mit gleicher Leichtigkeit von oben, wie gegen das Licht betrachten kann. Dabei befindet sich e. Einweisung wie durch Vergleichung der Größe, Form und Gruppierung der Spiegel, Poren u. Jahresringe aus dem kleinsten Span des Baums bestimmt werden kann. Der macherische Proceß durch welchen diese Schnitte erhalten sind, ist, soviel ich weiß, Nördlinger's Geheimniß. Auf der Londner Weltausstellung 1851 haben sie eine Preismedaille erhalten.“

(Have you heard about Nördlinger's wood cross-sections ? (Two volumes have been published up to now in Stuttgart and Tübingen in 1852 and 1856, each embracing 100 wood types.) If you haven't, I advise you strongly to get them. They are exceptionally beautiful and will interest you particularly, as a botanist. It is an instructive collection of 200 wood types displayed in sections [wood blades] smaller than a square inch, as thin as bladder skin, glued on paper vertically in the direction of veins, so that they can be as easily examined from above, as well as against light. Explanation is also provided on how to determine age through comparing the size, form and grouping of mirrors, pores and year rings coming from the smallest tree shaving. The operational process through which these cuts were obtained, is, as far as I know, Nördlinger's secret. They won a medal at the London World Fair of 1851.)

We noticed that Karl Knorre was always eager to share the latest scientific news he discovered with his fellows and colleagues, as it also appeared in his correspondence with W. Struve.

An ironic turn of mind

Besides their common scientific curiosity, Karl Knorre and Vladimir Dahl shared the same ironic and sarcastic turn of mind toward Russian contemporary life, a trademark of their characters. For instance, let us quote the anecdote closing Letter N° 2, Page 3, lines 27-33 :

„Wie gefällt Dir die folgende Geschichte ? Im vorigen Jahre starb hier ein gewisser Iwanov, Adjutant bei einer Flotte-equipage, in dessen Nachlaße sich über 2.000 von der Post gestohlene Briefe fanden. Sein Diener sagte aus, er habe jeden Winter seine Oefen mit Briefen geheizt, und die auf gefundenen 2.000 Briefe seyen nur der Rest des Heizmaterials vom letzten Winter...“

(How do you like the following story ? Last year someone called Ivanov died here, a flag lieutenant of a ship crew, whose inheritance contained more than 2 000 letters stolen from the

postal service. His servant declared that every winter he heated his stoves with letters and that the 2 000 letters found were just the rest of his heating supply from last winter...)

Karl Knorre was certain that his friend Vladimir would highly appreciate this anecdote in the vein of Gogol's satirical stories on Russian bureaucracy and society. This was his small gift to the author of the "Tales by the Cossack from Lugansk", who dedicated to him the second tale dealing with the funny mishaps of a provincial judge with dumb peasants [17]. The dedication could be interpreted as an allusion to Karl Knorre's own mishaps with representatives of different trades and administrations in Nikolayev where negligence and incompetence were the general rule.

A long-lasting friendship – Letters N° 3 and 4 of November 1864 and January 1865

Neither time nor separation could affect friendship between both men, as show Letters N° 3 and 4 addressed to Dahl in Moscow almost ten years after the first two ones. In Letter N° 3 of November 6. 1864, Karl Knorre thanked Dahl and his wife for receiving him and his wife at their Moscow home. It is known that Karl Knorre had attended the celebration of the 25th anniversary of Pulkovo Observatory on July 22. 1864. On that occasion he had met for the last time his old master and friend Wilhelm Struve who has seriously ill and would die on November 23. of the same year. Karl Knorre was probably returning from Saint-Petersburg and some more visits when he stopped in Moscow at the Dahls' on his way back to Nikolayev.

As for Dahl, he had to leave Nizhni-Novgorod in 1859 because of a conflict with local governor A.N. Muraviov. He was then moved to the Department of State Properties but forced to resign in 1861. Now he was living in Moscow in a house on Presnia street and busy working on the edition of his great Dictionary.

Karl Knorre wrote Letter N° 3 more than six weeks after his return to Nikolayev and after receiving from Dahl a parcel containing a fur coat ordered in Moscow which probably had not been ready on time for his departure (lines 1-8) :

*„Allzulange haben wir den Dank für Eure
freundl. Aufnahme verschoben. Am 17 Sept. kamen
wir wohlbehalten hier an und seitdem ziehe ich wieder
nach alter Weise am Schinderkarren. Etwa 14 Tage
später kam auch der Pelz hier an, durch deßen Besor-
gung Du mir einen solchen Freundschaftsdienst
erwiesen und aus einer großen Verlegenheit*

geholffen hast.“

(We are very late in sending our thanks for your kind reception. On Sept. 17 we arrived here safe and since then I got back on the treadmill. About two weeks later the fur coat arrived, too, thanks to your so friendly favour which helped me out of a great trouble.)

Relying on Dahl's helpfulness and unfailing devotedness, Karl Knorre seizes the opportunity to ask him a new favour : to buy some fabrics for his wife. Here we learn that those fabrics were twice less expensive in Moscow than in remote Nikolayev. Dr. Dieterichs who precisely will be soon passing through Moscow, will take the parcel from the Dahls and bring it to Nikolayev. Karl Knorre attached to his letter a note from his wife describing the wished types and lengths of fabrics, as well as the sum of money needed for the purchase. Everything was carefully planned (Page 2, lines 2-12 ; 18-19) :

„ ... *Seit dem 27 Sept.*
ist meine Tochter Amalie die Braut des Stabs-
capitains Gerlé. Die Begebenheit ist die un-
mittelbare Veranlassung
des gegenwärtigen Briefes, wie Du aus d. Einlage
meiner Frau siehst ; sie bittet um Besorgung einiger Stoffe, die hier dopp.
so theuer sind als bei Euch. Verzeih diese neue
Beschwerde die wir Euch machen. Ich habe meinen
Schwager Dr. Dieterichs, der jetzt in Petersburg
ist und seinen Rückweg über Moskwa nehmen
wird, gebeten, das Paket bei Euch abzuholen....
Es folgen hierbei R. 200 für die Aufträge meiner
Frau.“

(Last Sept. 17., my daughter became engaged to Staff Captain Gerlé. This event is the direct cause of the present letter, as you see from the attached message from my wife ; she is asking for the purchase of some fabrics which are here twice as expensive as in Moscow. Please, excuse us for disturbing you both once again. I asked my brother-in-law Dr. Dieterichs who is now in St. Petersburg and will go through Moscow on his way back to take the parcel from you... Here enclosed are 200 roubles for my wife's orders.)

Dahl and his wife fulfilled their mission quite successfully, as shown in Letter N° 4 of January 5. 1865 (Page 1, lines 1-8) :

„ *Tausend und aber tausend Dank, theurer [Freund u. Bruder]*
Казак Луганский, für die herrlichen Sachen die wir abermals
Deiner Güte verdanken, und deren Schönheit und

*Wohlfeilheit die hierige Damenwelt nicht
genug bewundern kann. Sie kamen hier grade zu
rechter Zeit an um auf dem Weihnachtstische zu
prangen, wo sie den bedeutendsten und brillantesten
Posten bildeten.“*

(Thousand, thousand thanks, dear [friend and brother] Cossack Lugansky [Dahl's pen name], for the marvellous things which we owe to your kindness. The ladies here cannot stop wondering at their beauty and their low price. These things came here just on time to adorn the Christmas table, where they formed the most important and brilliant parts.)

Therefore, the fabrics provided by the Dahls enabled the Knorre ladies to appear in magnificent attire at the Christmas 1864 celebrations and dazzle local guests. However, Karl Knorre does not linger on festivities. He is in a gloomy mood. Since the Nikolayev observatory lost its naval function, the tasks of its director have been changed. In 1862 he was appointed director of temporary courses organized in two different schools, which led him to devote himself entirely to teaching at the cost of his astronomical activities. He complained about it in Letter N° 4, page 2, lines 1-6 :

*„Seit ich Direktor [zweier Schulen] meiner временные классы geworden bin
und täglich von Morgen 8 bis Abends 6 [Stunden zu geben
habe, ist] mit dem Unterricht der lieben Jugend
beschäftigt bin, ist an die Redaktion meiner
лекции практической астрономии nicht zu
denken.“*

(Ever since I have become the director of [two schools] my temporary classes and have been busy teaching our beloved young ones every day from eight in the morning till six at night, I cannot even think of writing up my “Lectures on Practical Astronomy”.)

Last secret thoughts and sad news

Besides his frustrations in his work, Karl Knorre is overwhelmed with family worries. In Letter N° 3 of November 6. 1964, he tells about his visit to his eldest son Theodor in Kolomna, his first stop after Moscow on his way back to Nikolayev. The travellers arrived in sad circumstances, just one week after the death of Theodor's last-born baby girl. As to Theodor's other children, Karl Knorre judged them frail and sickly (page 1, lines 18-19 ; page 2, lines 1-2) :

*„Theodor's Töchterchen war 8 Tage vor unserer An-
Kunft in Kolomna gestorben ; auch seine Söhne sind schwächliche//
Kinder, die nicht so aussehen als gehörten sie der*

Knorreschen Race an."

(Theodor's little daughter died one week before our arrival in Kolomna ; his sons, too, are sickly children, not looking like members of the Knorre stock.)

The words are harsh, coming from a grand-father, but they are probably directed at Theodor, whose marriage to a humble and frail governess coming from Fribourg in Switzerland the astronomer did not approve of. Besides, in managing his career as an architect-engineer Theodor could not make ends meet. After completing building projects he ended up with empty pockets and was compelled to run desperately after a new contract, as the father deplored (Letter N° 4 of January 15. 1865, page 2, lines 7-9) :

„Theodor scheint in großer Verlegenheit zu seyn, obgleich er mir nicht ausdrücklich schreibt. Er hat die ausgeführten Bauten so wohlfeil übernommen, daß [ihm] jetzt nach Endigung derselben seine Taschen leer sind.“

(Theodor seems to be in great difficulties, although he does not write to me explicitly. He contracted for the executed building works on so unfavourable terms that after their completion he remains with empty pockets.)

His worries concerning the welfare of his other children will never leave Karl Knorre in peace, as he lamented (lines 19-21) :

„[Wenn] Sollte ich auch noch 40 Jahre leben [sollte], so werde ich es doch nicht erleben, alle meine Kinder versorgt zu wissen.“

(Even if I lived forty more years, I would never see all my children well established.)

Confiding his pains to “theurer Woldemar” (Woldemar is the German form of the Russian first name Vladimir) brings relief to the exiled astronomer, living in total seclusion, deprived of a genuine friendly circle. But children are not the only cause of grief. Karl Knorre and Vladimir Dahl reached an age when one loses long-time friends one after the other. Knorre informs Dahl that two of their common friends recently passed away (Letter N° 3, page 2, lines 14-18 :

*„Vor etwa 3 Wochen starb hier Викторъ Ивановичъ Буткевичъ, unser alter Freund und Spielgenosse beim Butterloch.
So löscht ein Licht nach dem anderen aus,
Und endlich troll'n wir uns selbst nach Haus.“*

(About three weeks ago our old friend and ball game¹ partner Viktor Ivanovych Butkevych passed away. So a light is blown out one after the other, and finally we, too, are trotting along to our last destination.)

(Letter N° 4, page 2, lines 12-18) :

*„ Seit meinem letzten Briefe ist wieder einer
unserer alten Spielgenossen, Александръ Андреевичъ
Ключниковъ, dahingegangen. Er starb in der Nacht
vom 2ten auf den 3ten Januar in Sewastopol an
einem Herzleiden. Er war contre-Admiral und
Командиръ Севастопольского Порта. Sein
Bruder Федоръ ist schon seit Jahren todt.“*

(Since my last letter, another of our old game partners, Aleksandr Andreyevych Klyuchnykov, passed away. He died during the night of January 2nd to Jan. 3rd in Sevastopol from a heart disease. He was Commodore and Commander of the Sevastopol port. His brother Fyodor died a long time ago.)

Daily life is not designed to help the ageing astronomer fight his melancholy, especially when he tries to assess the record of his 45 years' activity. The final result seems to him meagre and disappointing, as compared to the ambitions of the young enthusiastic scientist he was at the beginning of his career (Letter N° 4, page 1, lines 9-13) :

*„ Von meinem Leben kann ich nicht viel weiter
melden als ‚cogito, ergo sum‘. Obgleich ich vom frühen
Morgen bis in die späte Nacht arbeite und nie Besuche
mache, so fürchte ich doch daß mir sehr geringe Spuren
meiner Thätigkeit mich überleben werden.“*

(About my life I cannot not say much more than ‚cogito, ergo sum‘. Although I work from early morning to late night and never go on visits, I fear that only very meagre traces of my activity will survive me.)

This opinion hardly reflects the honourable status which Karl Knorre had attained in the world of astronomy. Too many hardships suffered by the astronomer in his career and family life easily explain the evolution of his character toward disillusion and bitterness. One can understand how precious “theurer Woldemar” was to him as a confidant with his ever benevolent ear.

Conclusion

¹ Butterloch : a type of ball game similar to golf, very popular with German Balts in those times.

The four letters presented here, which are probably the only ones preserved from the correspondence Knorre-Dahl, represent but a tiny part of it, if one considers the number of letters possibly exchanged during the four decades following Dahl's departure from Nikolayev until his death. But the above quoted excerpts are meaningful enough to give us a glimpse into the deep relationship uniting both friends in their minds, spirits and hearts.

In January 1865, when he received Knorre's Letter N° 4, Vladimir Dahl was, as we know, busy working on the first edition of his Dictionary. The task engrossed him until 1867. On the following year, his efforts were at last recognized, when he was elected as honorary member of the Saint-Petersburg Academy of Science. Then he devoted his last years to the preparation of the second edition of his acclaimed Dictionary and died covered with honours on October 4. 1872.

As to Karl Knorre, he continued fulfilling all his obligations at Nikolayev observatory until June 1871, when he obtained at last his pension after fifty years of faultless service. In October of the same year he moved to Berlin with his wife and youngest children and died there on August 4. 1883, almost eleven years after the death of his dear comrade Vladimir Dahl. The four letters rescued here from oblivion are precious testimonies of the close friendship uniting two pioneers of the 19th century, namely astronomer Karl Knorre and lexicographer Vladimir Dahl.

Review

The four letters presented here were recently discovered by the author of this article in notebooks of private correspondence left by Nikolayev astronomer Karl Knorre (1801-1883). They immediately command attention because of the identity of their addressee, famous Russian lexicographer Vladimir Dahl (1801-1872). The contents of these letters offers precious insights into the relationship between two notable personalities of the 19th century. The scientist and the scholar became friends at the age of 20, when young midshipman Dahl attended courses in practical astronomy taught by Knorre at the Nikolayev Navigation School. Both young men were brought together by their common German cultural background, their passion for science and literature and their ironic turn of mind. These letters, written in German, are characterized by a great freedom of thought and illustrate an enduring friendship which lasted for over four decades in spite of geographical distance and all kinds of hardships met on each side. As documents, they also give the opportunity to revisit from inside the biography of both men. Their personal situation is described, as well as the historical circumstances surrounding them at the time when each letter was written. The Crimean war and its aftermath deeply affect the mood and concerns expressed in the first two letters dated 1855 and 1856. Knorre and Dahl hold radically opposed views on medicine but share the same limitless curiosity for knowledge and progress. Various subjects are discussed, such as

Faraday's experiments with turning tables, a telegraphic link with Simferopol, a new type of sealed envelopes and Nördlinger's works on wood cross-sections. As time goes by, the topics mentioned become more matter-of-fact, as shown in the last two letters dated 1864 and 1865 which are mostly devoted to private and domestic affairs and to the death announcements of common friends. On the whole, these four letters give a vivid and intimate picture of the friendship uniting two personalities who were together pioneers and witnesses of their times.

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