BRAUERIA (Lunz am See, Austria) 21:19-20 (1994)

L.A. Zhiltsova & V.D. Ivanov

In April 1993 was the 110th anniversary of the birth of Sofia Grigorievna Lepneva, the famous ichthyologist and limnologist. She was born on 15 April 1883 in Voronezh. Her father was a schoolteacher of mathematics. She remembered when at the age of 9 she stood at the corner at her father’s table in a small study, under an abacus hanging on the wall, dreaming about her future: she was going to be either an astronomer or a traveller. In summer the family made trips to villages, and her father told stories on warm nights about stars and planets in the Universe. Her mother bought books to her, such as those by Kaigorodov’s about birds and plants. Inspired by her mother, she wrote to Professor Kaigorodov about her tame birds. The well-known phenologist replied to his young correspondent, and they went on exchanging letters for many years.

When S.G.L. grew older, D.Kaigorodov advised her to buy Maevsky’s “Flora of Middle Russia” and to identify plants. At this time she was a senior schoolgirl and she gave private lessons. The first salary from these lessons paid for the book. Three summer holidays in the late 1890’s were taken up with plants identifying, and she decided to be a botanist.

When her schooldays were over, S.G.L. entered the Moscow Women’s High School because universities were intended exclusively for men. Courses by Professors M.Menzbir, N.Koltsov and other well-known biologists of that time roused her interests in zoology. Young Menzbir’s assistant, P.P.Sushkin, was a stimulating teacher, and after his classes the young ladies ran to libraries and book shops to get books for overnight reading. Sushkin’s attempts to organize scientific work at the Women’s High School were in conflict with the State system. Her study programme and failed. The Russian edition of Lampert’s book on life and fresh water appeared at that time, and Professors N.Koltsov and L.Krechetovitch recommended it for excursions. Thus students were steered to the aquatic insects.

The shooting of demonstrators in St.Petersburg in 1905 led to political instability in Russia. The Moscow Women’s High School was closed down and students demanded a Constituent Assembly and change in the State system. Street combats in Moscow began in December of that year. Students took part in these protests to help the rebels. Their were overcome and the revolution was stopped. S.G.L. was a brave woman: she took part in these rebel units, and joined a medical anti-cholera group in Voronezh Province.

The Moscow Women’s High School was reopened and students were allowed to take their final exams. S.G.L. left High School with Lampert’s book in hand and without any prospect of a job in Moscow. Women at that time had no chance of making a career in science; the only way was to teach. S.G.L. did not want a place in a government school, and found a position in a private school for peasant’s children in the remote Samara Province. Private schools at that time did not offer security, and S.G.L. was in three schools in four years. The only advantage was that she could develop her own programmes with practical and collecting work.

In 1911, S.G.L. began to work in a private women school in Yaroslavl in a position just vacated by A.M.Dmitriev, who later became a famous specialist in grass cultivation. Dmitriev moved to Moscow but from time to time he came back to Yaroslavl where he was a teacher and also an agronomist, a museum director, and a leader of the Yaroslavl Natural History Society; S.G.L. learnt much from him. His successor at the Society, I.V.Serebrennikov wanted S.G.L. to be a bryologist, but she kept to Lampert’s book and freshwater faunistics. The Yaroslavl Natural History Society Museum started an exposition about freshwater, and Lepneva with her schoolgirls and the Yaroslavl students became involved. Thus S.G.L. started to specialize in hydrobiology.

The scientific study of fresh water in Yaroslavl Province was proposed to her by Dmitriev in 1914. It was planned to investigate water quality in rivers near the cities of Rybinsk and Yaroslavl, and to write a textbook for the school freshwater excursions. These were the first scientific works carried out by S.G.L. Study groups organized by her collected material, and she sent it to specialists for determination. Caddisflies were mailed to A.V.Martynov who was in the Army at that time during the First World War. That parcel was never received and the collection was lost, and S.G.L. had no reply from Martynov.

In 1916 she published a book “From the life of fresh waters”. This field guide for schoolchildren had good press references.

S.G.Lepneva 1916 in Yaroslavl

The revolution of 1917 stopped the activities of the Natural History Society, and S.G.L. decided to organize on her own in the summer 1918 a hydrobiological laboratory in the empty school. She remembers one summer day when there was shooting, and the alarm was sounded. The Civil War had come close to Yaroslavl. She did not pay much attention to the sounds of battle, worked at her laboratory table and did not fear the danger. The next day there was more shooting and a bullet came through the window. She coolly picked it up and put it in the microscope box; then she took her rucksac and excursion bag, and went on foot out of the city. A week later she came back; half the city was in ruins, ravaged by fire. The laboratory was destroyed, but fortunately the microscope was undamaged. The fighting and subsequent events were so shocking that she gave up her scientific work and went back to her native Voronezh. She decided to help the revolutionary forces in their efforts to rebuild Russia and became a travelling lecturer in Voronezh and gave talks on Natural History to workers and peasants in large lecture-halls. In 1919, she took part in the creation of the People’s University in Voronezh where she gave the lecture course in invertebrate zoology. The University was closed next year and the job was lost. S.G.L. went to Behning’s
S.G. Lepneva and her friends at the All-Union Entomological Congress 1959 in Leningrad. Sitting from left to right: E.P. Luppova (working on Neuroptera Myrmeleontidae), O.A. Tchernova (Ephemeroptera), S.G. Lepneva, L.A. Zhiltsova (Plecoptera), N.I. Orshanskaya (the Zoological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR). Standing from left to right: A.N. Luppova (Isoptera), E.A. Tetyueva (technician, the curator of aquatic insects), M.N. Kandybina (technical assistant), Yu.I. Zapekina-Dulkeit (Plecoptera).
Zeitschrift/Journal: Braueria

Jahr/Year: 1994

Band/Volume: 21

Autor(en)/Author(s): Zhiltsova L. A., Ivanov Vladimir D.

Artikel/Article: Life and work are the same in memory of S.G.Lepneva 19-20