



# Pitirim A. Sorokin Foundation

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## QUESTIONS TO SERGEI PITIRIMOVICH SOROKIN

[from students of Syktyvkar State University, January – 28 /30, 2015]

1. When did you recognize that your father has a status of the most important sociologists in the World?
2. What sort of a father Pitirim Sorokin was? In what areas you look up for him? [In what ways his personality influenced your own? ]
3. Could you, please, under what circumstances did your parent meet?
4. How often the Russian language was spoken in your family?
5. What is your attitude, when someone criticizes Pitirim's writings?
6. Which sociological ideas, among the ones suggested by your father, are important today?
7. How popular PAS ideas are in the US?
8. What would be Pitirim's life like, if your family decided to stay in Russia in the fall of 1922?
9. What are your dreams?

## ANSWERS

I thank the students of Syktyvkar State University for their inquiries. I will only provide brief answers to them because most of them are given more fully by several journals and books readily available in Komi. These include several issues of the journal, "ART," and the recent album-catalog, "Pitirim Alexandrovitch Sorokin," published by the University in 2014. The last book contains my mother's and my own family reminiscences.

1. I was born in a family that was unusually close, so my earliest memories included many friends of my parents. The majority of these were highly educated professionals, such as professors, great musicians, and "intellectuals" of various kinds. In their meetings Pitirim was often the center of attention. So from earliest days I could see that he was very bright and appealed to these kinds of people. During my early years attending public schools in Winchester, it already became evident that my parents were exceptional, and from seeing father always busy reading and writing at home, with a new sociological work being published almost every year, my respect increased. And since his opinions on such matters were often quoted by the national press, my admiration was confirmed.

2. Father was a serious person, and from my point of view as a child, rather strict (in a fair and reasonable way), but he usually kept a certain sense of humor. He was always courteous to persons with lesser abilities or poor education, usually adapting himself tolerably to the company he was in. But he still liked to be thought of as "the professor." He did not tolerate rude behavior well, or stupidity,, and his response was quick and outspoken. As for his children, he expected us to do well in school and to aim to do something "serious" and creative during our lives, but he did not try to channel us into specific professions.

As I grew up I developed many interests but professionally chose the natural sciences, eventually following a research career in the field of cell biology. In this work, as in many others, it is challenging to look for a "bigger picture,"and how results obtained from a simple experiment may sometimes be seen to help understand a larger question. Many researchers contribute confining themselves to small-scale studies, but others will try to look beyond for this greater significance. My father's work in "macro-sociology," with his "Social and Cultural Dynamics," was eye-opening in this respect and certainly

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influenced my outlook. His unusual ability to understand political events was attributable to his broad outlook, and today I find few media “pundits” with the background to match him.

3. As my mother describes in her reminiscences, this occurred about 1913 in St. Petersburg at one of the literary evenings held in the apartment of Kalistrat Zhakov and his wife. The tsarist police came in at the time to take down the names of the guests, but no arrests were made.

4. My parents frequently spoke Russian to one another at home and when visiting Russian friends and visitors. But father was anxious to improve his English for his lectures at Harvard and few inhabitants in our suburban town could speak Russian. Since my brother Peter and I went to school and made friends there, English was the language we used. We studied Russian from textbooks but never managed to speak it well, and it was not a language taught in our high school, which offered only Latin, French, and Spanish.

5. As far as I am concerned, anyone is free to criticize my father’s writings. As I am not a sociologist, I would not concern myself. Father enjoyed debating and could defend himself, judged from my own recollections and particularly from the substantive criticism and response published in a book called “Pitirim A. Sorokin in Review,” edited by Philip J. Allen (1963).

6. As I have mentioned, (1) a comprehension of “Social and Cultural Dynamics” can give the reader an insightful understanding of human social, cultural and political history as considered over long spans of time— how to interpret human societies in that light—and how a given cultural type is to a large extent determined by underlying values. (2) Since father wrote an important pioneering work on “Social Mobility” in the 1920s these concepts have become widely adopted in public discourse and remain important today. (3) There is also much relevant material discussed in a small book called “Power and Morality,” which is written in a popular style and deals with problems affecting the behavior of governments that certainly exist today. (4) Father contributed to major sub-disciplines of sociology to an extent few other social scientists have equaled, so much remains to rediscover in these works.

7. As can be seen from the “academic” biography of Pitirim by Barry Johnston (1985), various topics he wrote about were received by (mainly) American sociologists with wide approval or disapproval at different times in his career. At present I would say that interest in Pitirim’s collected work is greater in Russia than in the United States. Here sociologists among my friends tell me that at present (1) sociological theory and (2) macro-sociological studies are generally out of favor by sociologists who attend the “establishment” American Sociological Association. “Public sociology” still remains popular but may have begun to undergo a decline in interest. What seems most current are rather more niche-topics such as women’s rights, income disparities, Hispanic immigration issues, and racial and other immediate social problems often discussed by the media and by people calling in to talk shows, etc. Not that these issues are not important, but they seem to dominate the sociological conversation and are not addressed in particularly original ways. As to how this affects the American Sociological Association, it seems that organization and its membership no longer represents academic sociology but has opened itself to individuals in social work, etc, which has tended to make it less professional.

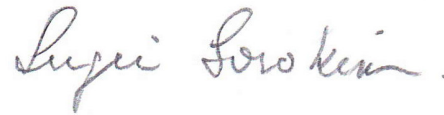
An exception seems to be that for its annual meeting this Association has accepted for one of its “Sections” the subject of “Morality, Altruism, and Social Solidarity” as a new field for academic sociology. For this Pitirim Sorokin’s pioneering studies on altruistic behavior, summarized in “The Ways and Power of Love,” provide much theoretical groundwork for this and so are at the forefront of the new field. Pitirim’s works on altruism have not yet been translated into Russian, but in Japan there has been interest in them for many years, and most recently, a German translation of the main work has begun in Germany, as awareness of the new field begins to spread.

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8. If Pitirim and Elena had stayed in Russia instead of being forced to emigrate, they would have been executed, and neither my brother Peter nor I brought into existence.

9. My dreams are those of an aging person who still can function passably. Since retiring from my scientific career, I have of course involved myself with father's scholarly heritage but have also returned to other interests. These were kept alive throughout my life but put aside for too long. Heading the list is to improve my skills at writing classical music, which is the music I love the most. Relative to Russia, my dream would be to hear a complete performance of my "Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom," (published in Vologda 2011), by a full 40-member church choir. Performances of various fragments have taken place by smaller choirs in Syktyvkar and Vologda and a compact disc made, but not a complete recording. Otherwise I hope to hear a performance of a number of secular works, such as my Concerto for (Wald)horn and orchestra, which may soon be recorded in Bulgaria, and, thinking of northern Russia, a "Boreal Overture," now being written.

January 31st, 2015  
Winchester, Massachusetts

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sergei Sorokin". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.