

The Man With the Indelible Memory

Solomon Shereshevskii had a memory so perfect that he could recall every minute of his life in graphic detail. This bizarre capacity was further distinguished by the fact that he could "feel" images, "taste" colors, and "smell" sounds.

IMAGINE HAVING A MEMORY SO incredibly vivid that late in life you can still clearly recall your mother's face coming into focus as she bent over your crib. Or that words and numbers invoke specific concrete images: the word *blue* always calls up a small blue flag, the number 7 immediately brings to mind a man with a mustache.

A man with such a mind came to the attention of the Russian psychologist Alexander R. Luria in the early 1920's. Luria tells of his experiences with this remarkable man over some three decades in his book *The Mind of a Mnemonist*.

Solomon Shereshevskii, called simply S in the book, worked as a newspaper reporter in Moscow. S first came to see Luria when his editor became so impressed with his ability to remember facts without taking notes that the editor suggested S have his memory tested.

Luria began by reading off lists of numbers and having S repeat them from memory. As the lists got longer (up to 70 numbers) and the tests more complicated, Luria was increasingly astonished. S performed each test without error, and then to Luria's amazement was able to recite everything backward.

S's memory capacity was virtually boundless. Not only was there no limit to what he could remember, but each memory was *indelible*. This means that five, ten, or fifteen years after memorizing a list of numbers, he could recite the list perfectly, forward and backward, and describe in detail the room where the list was first memorized.

Luria also discovered that S's five senses seemed to fuse together whenever his mind recorded something. Recalling any stored impression would result in a state of "synesthesia" where memory becomes a medley of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Some scientists now think that the limbic system,



An inability to forget led to such mental overcrowding that S was not able to function normally.

which processes sensations, must have been so active in S that it overpowered the brain's ability to discriminate between the senses.

For S this meant that one voice sounded "crumbly and yellow," another like "a flame with fibers protruding from it." He refused to buy ice cream from a woman whose voice made him see "black cinders bursting out of her mouth."

Sounds of some words didn't match their meaning to S. The word for pig (*svinya* in Russian) felt wrong because its sound was "so fine, so elegant." But *khasser* (Yiddish for pig) was just right; it made him think of a pig's "fat, greasy belly caked with dried mud."

Such vivid image-making turned out to be the key to S's ability to memorize a long sequence of numbers. He would first translate the numbers into graphic mental pictures made up of sound, color, taste, smell, and touch, then distribute these snapshots along an imagined road in his mind. To recall them, he would simply walk along the road and "see" everything laid out before his eyes.

In a normal mind, impressions begin to fade almost immediately,

making room for new ones. For S, every incoming impression would last for hours, causing memories to back up and crowd each other. To reduce the confusion caused by this pile-up of images, S came up with some novel but ultimately ineffective ways to forget. First he tried covering whole groups of memories with an imaginary canvas. Then he tried writing down all the things he wanted to forget on pieces of paper and burning the paper. But the memories would not go up in smoke. After much practice, though, he was able to will some away.

For all its vivid precision, S's memory had serious drawbacks. Since it was so focused on *concrete particulars*, S had trouble identifying some things we all take for granted. For example, he could not always recognize familiar faces or voices on the telephone. "They change too much," he said. The subtle daily changes in someone's face or voice that the rest of us are able to overlook, challenged S's powers of recognition.

As a person, S seemed a bit awkward, slow, and timid, perhaps due to the phenomenal flood of images in his mind at all times—some of them uncontrollable and very disquieting—which he laboriously tried to sort out. He held dozens of jobs, until he finally settled on being a professional mnemonist—someone who performs memory stunts for paying audiences.

S always thought he was destined for greatness, but his mind was so richly stocked with lifelike images that he spent much of his time daydreaming. Perhaps in one way at least, S's "great thing" did finally arrive. Since its publication in 1968, A. R. Luria's study of S's amazing yet curiously crippled mind has been recognized as a classic work of literature and psychological research.

WHAT IS INTELLIGENCE?

1. When people, in general, say that someone is intelligent, what do you think they mean? In other words, what qualities or characteristics does this person possess?
2. When you say that someone is intelligent, what do you mean? Again, what qualities or characteristics do you think this person has?
3. Read the article, "The Man With the Indelible Memory." What would be good about being Solomon Shereshevskii? What wouldn't you like about being him?
4. Although Solomon Shereshevskii's memory was a problem because it was too good, is having a good memory in general a sign of an intelligent person? Why or why not?