

Outstanding organizer of post-graduate education of physicians, the representative of the Soviet therapeutic elite Roman Albertovich Luria

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Abstract

The work aimed to introduce new scientific data and use well-known data about the professor, doctor of medicine, a well-known therapist, director of the Kazan Clinical Institute (Kazan Institute for Advanced Medical Studies) in 1920–1930 Roman Albertovich Luria. The multifaceted activity of R.A. Luria as a health care organizer, teacher, scientist, practitioner, author of unique monographs on internal medicine is shown. In 1920–1941, R.A. Luria was a member of the Soviet scientific and medical elite of healthcare organizers and therapists. In the history of domestic medicine R.A. Luria is the organizer of the Soviet system of postgraduate education of doctors, a prominent scientist who made a significant contribution to the development of the national clinic of internal diseases in the first half of the twentieth century, and the pride of Kazan medicine, who remained in the memory of Kazan citizens as a doctor “capable of creating a miracle”.

Keywords: R.A. Luria, postgraduate medical education, Kazan Clinical Institute, Kazan State Institute of Advanced Medical Training.

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In the Russian medicine history, the outgoing year 2020 is a jubilee for the Russian system of post-graduate doctors, because 100 years ago, the Kazan Clinical Institute was founded, which was the first in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic and second in the country's institution for improvement of doctors. 10 years later, in 1930, the Central Institute for Advanced Medical Education (CIAME) was established. Whoever, from whatever angle, speaks or writes about merits of heroes of the day and their importance in the development of national healthcare has to remember the name of Professor Roman Albertovich Luria.

Roman (Ruvim-Solomon) Albertovich (Abel-Albertovich) Luria, therapist and organizer of Soviet health care, was born on May 16, 1874, under the Julian calendar in Brest-Litovsk, Grodno province. He was the fifth child in the family of a caretaker of the Jewish city secondary school. His

mother passed away when he was six years old, and his father followed a few years later. After which R.A. Luria lived with his sister's family, and studied at Vilna gymnasium and at Novgorod-Seversky gymnasium from year three.

In 1892, R.A. Luria applied for admission to the Faculty of Medicine at St. Vladimir University in Kiev; however, was denied because the allowed five percent of places for unchristened Jews had been fully occupied. After a petition addressed to the Minister of Public Education, R.A. Luria was allowed to enter the medical faculty of the Imperial Kazan University. He landed up in a strange city, without relatives and money, and earning a living by lessons. The young man did not have a coat, thus during winter he walks wrapped in a blanket, giving him the nickname “crazy Luria” [1].

In 1897, R.A. Luria graduated with honors from the Imperial Kazan University, and was recom-

mended by Professor N.A.Zasetsky for the position of supernumerary resident of the Department of Special Pathology and Therapy. However, according to the Russian Empire laws, an unchristened Jew could not work in the civil service, thus the trustee of the educational district disapproved his candidacy [2]. After working for a year as a doctor at Buinsk Zemstvo Hospital in the Simbirsk province, he returned to Kazan and opened his private doctor's clinic in Kolesnikov's rooms on the crowded Rybnoryadskaya square (now the Koltso Square).

In 1899, R.A. Luria received a position as an external student at Kazan Provincial Zemstvo Hospital and full-time teacher of a paramedic school recommended by the senior physician of the provincial hospital and director of the paramedic school, Professor N.A.Zasetsky. He performed an experimental thesis research about the role of sensory nerves of the diaphragm in breathing innervation in the physiology laboratory of N.A.Mislavsky. In 1902, his thesis defense was a complete success. From the very beginning of his journey in medicine, R.A.Luria combined medical practice and scientific research.

In 1903, Professor N.A.Zasetsky was approved as the head of the department of the hospital therapeutic clinic, and R.A.Luria received the position of supernumerary resident and teaching assistant of this department. From 1909 until the outbreak of World War I, he was on scientific missions several times, mainly in the F.Kraus Berlin clinic. He has greatly improved his skills as a gastroenterologist with the founder of clinical gastroenterology, I.Boas.

Biography of R.A.Luria reliably testifies that formally he is a disciple of the Honored Ordinary Professor Nikolai Alexandrovich Zasetsky (1855–1917), a student and assistant of V.A.Manassein. However, in the informative biographical article of the Kazan Professor R.G.Sayfutdinov, students of N.A.Zasetsky were professors L.L.Fofanov (Kazan), G.A.Lyubenetsky (Saratov), and M.N.Mikhailov (Irkutsk) [3]. Apparently, N.A.Zasetsky did not mention R.A.Luria among his main students. However, the future founder of the Kazan State Institute of Advanced Medical Training (State Institute of Further Training of Physicians [SIFTP]) never emphasized his belonging to the Zasetsky School. When analyzing scientific works, it is obvious that there is no continuity in R.A. Luria's research style. In addition, N.A.Zasetsky and R.A. Luria were different in origin, upbringing, and views. Thus, it is known that Zasetsky, being an aristocrat by birth and a monarchist by convictions, was one of the organizers and ideologists of the "Black Hundred" in Kazan.

During the Russo-Japanese War, R.A. Luria served as a junior resident of a mobile field hospital of the 3rd Manchu Army, and was awarded the Order of Saint Anna, third class with swords and the Order of St. Stanislaus with swords (1905). During the World War I, he was a senior physician of the 94th Infantry Reserve Regiment. From 1917, he served as a senior resident of the reserve evacuation hospital No. 93, and in 1918–1919, he was a chief physician of the evacuation hospital No. 91 in Kazan.

Even before the World War I, R.A.Luria was widely and far known outside Kazan as a private practitioner. His daughter recalled "passers-by took off their hats, and greeting him when he rode in his own carriage through the city... Our family lived in Kazan at 39 Bolshaya Prolomnaya Street (now Bauman Street). The apartment occupied the entire top floor of a two-story building that previously belonged to the famous flour-milling merchant Okonishnikov... Until 1915–1916, my father had his own equipage, until the horse was taken by the military department... In addition to the sick of the city, the most severely ill patients who were considered incurable were brought to him from distant regions... From time to time, while waiting for an attendance, the entire large courtyard was filled with carts or sledges..." [4] The young doctor was extremely proactive and adventurous. According to the memoirs of his student Professor L.M. Rakhlin, after regular trips to clinics in Germany, he advertised in newspapers: "Doctor of Medicine Luria, upon returning from abroad, resumed receiving patients" [5].

In the pre-revolutionary years, the social activities of R.A.Luria were very prominent. Particularly, it connected him with the outstanding scientist-therapist of Kazan University, A.N.Kazem-Bek, who organized the Kazan department of the All-Russian League for the Struggle against Tuberculosis (1912), and was its chairman. Volunteers collected donations at special events, including the annual citywide White Flower Days, paid lectures, and performances. Funds raised were used for regular care for patients with tuberculosis from low-income families, and ensured the work of the suburban summer colony for "weak-chested children." In 1914, in the village of Kamenka near Kazan, the construction of a free sanatorium "Kamenka" was started, and a free outpatient clinic for patients with tuberculosis operated in the city. Lectures were given about tuberculosis with its prevention, and thousands of thematic leaflets and brochures were distributed. One of the main assistants of A.N.Kazem-Bek in this large-scale and diverse charitable work was his comrade (that is,

deputy) of the Chairman of the Management Board of the Kazan Division of the League, R.A. Luria.

In 1912, he was one of the organizers of the provincial system of workers' insurance through sickness funds. Together with attorney Blatt, he headed the Kazan branch of the Committee for Aid to the Jews of Russia, created by the Joint¹. In the days of the February Revolution of 1917, soldiers elected the chief physician of the military hospital R.A. Luria to the Military Committee and to the first Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, who actually took power in Kazan and in the Volga Military District [6].

After the October events of 1917, the second stage of the biography of R.A. Luria started. Occupying various positions in the Red Army, he simultaneously actively joined in the creation of Soviet health care institutions in Kazan as a member of the first collegium of the Kazan Provincial Health Administration. Since 1920, he is a member of the People's Commissariat of Health of the Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic (TSSR). Even before the appearance of the city health department, he organized more than 20 medical institutions in Kazan [7], and was the organizer and deputy chairman of the provincial "Chrezkornitf," the committee for combating typhus and recurring fever. This was the energetic, bright beginning of R.A. Luria's activities as an organizer of Soviet health care.

Later, his activity was focused on solving an important state task of those years, such as providing retraining for doctors who graduated from the accelerated course during the World War I or those who did not receive a full-fledged traditional medical education during the difficult conditions of the first years of Soviet power. A man with a keen sense of time, R.A. Luria was one of the first to realize this social order. He was one of the initiators and organizers of the V.I. Lenin Kazan Clinical Institute (1920) creation, and was its first director (until 1930). In 1923, the institute (the first in the system of institutes for advanced medical education created under Soviet rule in Russia) was included in the number of scientific institutions of the People's Commissariat for Health of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), and was transferred from the local to the state budget, which was then renamed to SIFTP.

¹ Joint is an American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, created in 1914 to help Jews who suffered during the World War I. According to the memoirs of his daughter, R.A. Luria was an active member of the city's Jewish religious community, participated in the construction of the synagogue building on Malaya Prolomnaya Street, and even rented a personal space in the prayer hall.

In the most difficult conditions of that time, R.A. Luria relied constantly on the support of both the TSSR government and the People's Commissar N.A. Semashko, who in lean 1921 visited the institute, and in 1927 presided over the ceremonial meeting of the Council of the V.I. Lenin SIFTP [8]. The benevolent position of the Soviet government was understandable. Along with the main task of retraining doctors and bringing the medical network of Kazan into some sort of order, another topical issue was being solved, which is the training of medical personnel for the Volga region and the East of Russia.

All pressing issues of financing, material, technical, and personnel provisions in the event of a confrontation between two educational and scientific medical centers of Kazan, the medical faculty of the university and SIFTP, were resolved by the city and the republic leaders invariably in favor of a socially and ideologically close new university and to the detriment of the faculty which was old-regime, conservative, and hostile in the spirit. In the hardest period of 1921–1922, the TSSR Commissariat of Health provided the financing of the institute and allocated inventory, which includes food for patients and food rations for the staff, while the medical faculty of the university tried in vain to get at least some kind of provision for university clinics from the People's Commissariat of the RSFSR [9]. R.A. Luria did not participate in the work of the faculty. At the same time, the prominent figures of the Kazan clinic of internal diseases, university Professor S.S. Zimnitsky and N.K. Goryaev taught their courses at SIFTP.

With all the incredible difficulties of that time, the director of the new institute in 1920 managed to open the first seven clinics, including the clinic of internal diseases with a 70-bed department, an X-ray room which was one of the few in the city [10], and a central clinical laboratory. R.A. Luria was in charge of this clinic as an "independent teacher" since 1920 and as a professor since 1922 [11]. Recommending R.A. Luria for this title, the reviewer and classic of Russian physiology A.F. Samoilov, who is known for his scientific exactingness, summed up about his thesis as a scientific work that is "currently a common property," and referred to the opinion of the great physiologist Ch.S. Sherrington. In 1927, the People's Commissariat for Health of Russia assigned the therapeutic clinic of R.A. Luria with his name and established three scholarships named after him for specialist doctors from the Volga region nationalities.

In the 1920s, being an authoritative scientist and healthcare organizer, R.A. Luria repeatedly visited

Germany with scientific trips and worked in clinics in Berlin, including F.Kraus and G.Bergman, as well as in clinics in Frankfurt and Hamburg. In 1929, the famous Kazan therapist delivered a keynote speech on visceral syphilis and lectures on cardiac arrhythmias in Netherlands. He represented Soviet Medicine at the first World Congress of Gastroenterologists in Brussels (1929) and the fifth Congress of Physicians in Ankara (1935). Thus, there is every reason to conclude that the Russian scientist-therapist from distant, little-known Kazan was widely known to the therapeutic community of Europe.

In the second decade of the 20th century in Kazan, R.A.Luria was considered the most famous and popular therapist, along with S.S.Zimnitsky. Their highest diagnostic skill in clinical casuistry was based on the gift of medical intuition, mastery of the anamnestic method, breadth of scientific outlook, and logic of developed clinical thinking. As stated by Professor L.M.Rakhlin, who was the closest student of R.A.Luria, “the latter and S.S.Zimnitsky were similar with their ability to approach each patient by mastering the patient’s psychology and using it for treatment. This is now called psychotherapy. These two luminaries were related by brilliant intuition. However, in many aspects, they were very different from one another. R.A.Luria was very tolerant and had a great sense of humor, unlike S.S.Zimnitsky, he eagerly followed everything new and strove to quickly use and apply everything that could enrich his understanding about the human body. R.A.Luria sought to obtain new equipment as soon as it appeared abroad. He usually used it first in Kazan by introducing it into the work of the clinic.”

Recalling the outstanding medical skill of his teacher, L.M.Rakhlin added that “R.A.Luria surprised us with his precise diagnoses, and did not miss a single unusual patient. He has a very wide diagnostic range. So, on the basis of skin edema, leukopenia, and an enlarged spleen in one visitor from Central Asia, he suspected leishmaniasis and proved it by puncture of the spleen. This was the only case in Kazan. In another patient with paroxysmal tachycardia, on the basis of a directed history, he suggested an allergic genesis of seizures in response to a certain food, reproduced the seizure, and stopped it immediately, causing vomiting. And then a skin test with an aqueous extract of the allergen proved to be right. The case was reflected in all therapeutic literature” [5].

Since 1930, the final and third Moscow stage of the life of R.A. Luria started when he was elected by competition to the department of general and hospital therapy of the then created sanitary and

hygienic department of the First Moscow Medical Institute (he headed this department from 1930–1932). In Moscow, he became one of the initiators and organizers of CIAME, deputy director of the institute for academic affairs and research, dean of the therapeutic cycle and professor, and head of the department of therapy No.1 (since 1932).

R.A.Luria took an active part in the creation of the Soviet system of postgraduate training of doctors, and in the early to mid-20th century, the number of SIFTPs in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics reached 11. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, following E.E.Eichwald, who founded the Eleninsky Clinical Institute in St.Petersburg (1885), R.A.Luria can be called the “father” of this unique Russian model of higher medical education. No such institutions in other countries. Since 1934, he is an outstanding organizer of the Soviet health care system and scientist-therapist who became the first scientific director of medical institutions of the Kremlin Medical and Sanitary Administration [12].

The numerous staff of the Department of Therapy No.1 of the CIAME under the guidance of R.A.Luria worked intensively, mainly on problems of gastroenterology. The clinic was equipped with a modern endoscopic room. Wherein, gastroscopy and sigmoidoscopy were performed. R.A.Luria was a brilliant lecturer. According to Professor L.P.Pressman, upon teaching young colleagues: “You should give lectures not above the audience level or below it, but find contact and give them right to the audience level.”

R.A.Luria was fluent in German, but he entrusted the abstracts of works he needed in other languages to his employees with a strict deadline. Being an experienced editor, he headed the journal “Soviet Medicine” (1937–1941) [13] which he established. If the work of employees seemed interesting to him, he easily subscribed to and set himself the first author.

Being a general clinician, R.A.Luria has published more than 150 scientific papers on various, often the most pressing problems of clinical medicine. His works on the problem of “hunger disease” (alimentary dystrophy), primarily the monograph “Edema Disease” (Kazan, 1922), which were written based on the analysis of huge clinical material during the famine in the Volga region, were widely known. He developed an immunological classification of clinical variants of malaria and the concept of alimentary (nutritive) allergy.

R.A. Luria had a particular interest in the early functional stages of various diseases, as exemplified by his research on visceral syphilis. Based on representative material (approximately 230 verified cases), he wrote a major monograph “Syphilis

and the Stomach” (Moscow, 1928, three editions, reprinted in German), which demonstrated the relative frequency of the disease not recognized due to medical ignorance.

Simultaneously, the main scientific interests of the outstanding internist were focused on two fields of research, the study of the pathology of the digestive system and general methodological problems of the clinic. He summarized results of studying chronic gastritis and its relationship with peptic ulcer disease [14], and described allergic diarrhea. His manual “Diseases of the Esophagus and Stomach” (Moscow-Leningrad, 1933, 1941) became the reference book of the country’s physicians. Following V.P. Obratsov and along with F.G. Yanovsky, M.I. Pevzner, N.D. Strazhesko, and M.P. Konchalovsky, R.A. Luria can be considered as one of the founders of Russian gastroenterology [15].

The ability of R.A. Luria to broad generalizations was clearly manifested in his original concepts on problems of psychosomatics. Along with D.D. Pletnev, he was the leader of the anthropopathological field in the Soviet therapeutic clinic, which opposed the localistic approach, and brought to the fore the study of the patient’s personality and the concept of functional pathology and psychosomatic disorders. The teaching of R.A. Luria on the so-called internal pattern of the disease, the understanding of which is the most important aspect of psychotherapy, had broad resonance. He was one of the pioneers in studying the problem of iatrogenics and their prevention [16–18].

Views of R.A. Luria were developed by numerous students (L.M. Rakhlin, M.G. Solovey, V.A. Kanevsky, and others) and followers, including 15 professors who took up positions at departments in Soviet universities, as well as approximately 30 associate professors [19]. However, sources do not contain any materials confirming the existence of the scientific school of R.A. Luria, which correspond to modern methodological criteria. Its creation could be hindered by his difficult path to science and the complexity of his personality. Like E.E. Eichwald, he considered his overacting objective as contribution to the improvement of qualifications of medical personnel, and not in creating his own scientific school.

In his last years, R.A. Luria suffered from diabetes mellitus. According to Professor M.G. Solovey,

at meetings “with sandwiches,” he only ate cheese and sausage, thus avoiding the bread. M.L. Rakhlin recalled during the Great Patriotic War that his teacher evacuated to Kazan with an “already amputated foot, but still with same full energy.” During the war, many students were at the front. Military doctor M.G. Solovey received monthly letters from the teacher².

After returning from Kazan to Moscow, Honored Scientist of the RSFSR (1935) R.A. Luria died on October 22, 1944, at the age of 70 years from stomach cancer after a long and painful illness, and diagnosed himself long before his death demonstrating courage and patience.

Anniversary editions and obituaries as well as statements of contemporaries allow us to believe that in the 1930s, R.A. Luria was a member of the group of leaders (“standard bearers”) of the Soviet clinic of internal diseases, along with D.D. Pletnev, M.P. Konchalovsky, G.F. Lang, and N.D. Strazhesko. Thus, the jubilee article in the Soviet medical journal announced: “On December 5, 1939, four prominent therapists of our country, professors Maxim Petrovich Konchalovsky (Moscow), Georgy Fedorovich Lang (Leningrad), Roman Albertovich Luria (Moscow), and Nikolai Dmitrievich Strazhesko (Kiev) were honored on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of their medical, scientific, teaching, and social activities. This celebration coincided with the 50th anniversary of the death of the great Russian therapist S.P. Botkin, and between these two dates there is not only a chronological coincidence, but also an internal relation” [20]. Precisely, these leaders led the forward movement of the Soviet therapeutic elite along the Botkin path.

At the end of his life, R.A. Luria was awarded a high award from the Soviet government, in 1943, and was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labor.

Concluding the biography of Roman Albertovich Luria, it can be stated that in the history of Russian medicine he, being a remarkable person, will forever remain in three images. Firstly, he was the organizer of the national system of postgraduate education for doctors. Secondly, he was a prominent scientist who made a significant contribution to the development of the Russian clinic of internal diseases during the early–mid-20th century. Thirdly, he was the pride of the Kazan medicine. He was inscribed in his chronicle, like his outstanding predecessors K.F. Fuchs, N.A. Vinogradov, and A.N. Kazem-Bek, as well as his contemporaries S.S. Zimnitsky, M.N. Cheboksarov, and N.K. Goryaev, and remained in the memory of Kazan residents as a doctor “able to create a miracle.”

²A recording of a conversation with a student of R.A. Luria, associate professor of his department, and professor of Central Institute for Advanced Medical Education Manuil Grigorievich Solovey (1978), from the personal archive of V.I. Borodulin.

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