

THE MIND OF A MNEMONIST

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As soon as I heard the words *merchant* and *sold*, I saw both the shop and the storekeeper, who was standing behind the counter with only the upper part of his body visible to me. He was dealing with a factory representative. Standing at the door of the shop I could see the buyer, whose back was toward me. When he moved off a little to the left, I saw not only the factory but also some account books—details that had nothing to do with the assignment. So I couldn't get the gist of the story.

And here's another example. Last year when I was chairman of a union organization I had to investigate whatever conflicts came up . . . Once they were describing some speeches that had been given in a circus tent in Tashkent, and others that were delivered at a meeting in Moscow . . . I saw all the details . . . Mentally I transported myself to Moscow and Tashkent. But this is just what I have to avoid doing. It's unnecessary. It doesn't matter whether the negotiations were held in Tashkent or elsewhere. What is important are the conditions they're describing. I was forced to block off everything that wasn't essential by covering it over in my mind with a large canvas.

THE ART OF FORGETTING

This brings us to the last issue we had to clarify to get a fuller picture of S.'s memory. Though the problem itself is paradoxical, and the solution still difficult to understand, we will have to attempt some description at this point.

Many of us are anxious to find ways to improve our memories; none of us have to deal with the problem of how to forget. In S.'s case, however, precisely the reverse was true. The big question for him, and the most troublesome, was how he could learn to forget.

In the passages quoted above, we had our first glimpse of the problems S. ran into, trying to understand and recall a text. There were numerous details in the text, each of which gave rise to new images that led him far afield; further details produced still more details, until his mind was a virtual chaos. How could he avoid these images, prevent himself from seeing details which kept him from understanding a simple story? This was the way he formulated the problem.

Moreover, in his work as a professional mnemonist he had run into another problem. How could he learn *to forget* or *to erase* images he no longer needed? The solution to the first problem proved to be simple enough, for as S. continued to work on his technique of using images for recall, he tended to make increasingly greater use of shorthand versions of them, which automatically cut out many superfluous details. As he described it:

Here's what happened yesterday when I was listening on the radio to the account of Levanevsky's arrival.

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Before, I would have seen everything: the airport, the crowds, the police cordon that had been set up . . . This doesn't happen now. I don't see the airport and it makes no difference to me whether Levanevsky landed in Tushino or in Moscow. All I see is a small segment of the Leningrad Highway, the most convenient place to meet him . . . What matters to me now is to catch every word he says; it's of no account where the event takes place. But if this had happened two years ago I would have been upset at not seeing the airport and all the other details. I'm glad now that I see only what's essential. The setup isn't important; what appears now are the necessary items, not all the minor circumstances. And this represents a great saving.

In time S.'s attempts to focus his attention, to isolate the essential details as a basis on which to generalize to the whole, brought results. Earlier, he would often have to "screen off what he had seen" by covering it with a "thick canvas," whereas at this stage he automatically screened off excess details by singling out key points of information which he used for his shorthand method of coding images.

The second problem, however, was more difficult to solve. S. frequently gave several performances an evening, sometimes in the same hall, where the charts of numbers he had to recall were written on the one blackboard there and then erased before

the next performance. This led to certain problems, which he described as follows:

I'm afraid I may begin to confuse the individual performances. So in my mind I erase the blackboard and cover it, as it were, with a film that's completely opaque and impenetrable. I take this off the board and listen to it crunch as I gather it into a ball. That is, after each performance is over, I erase the board, walk away from it, and mentally gather up the film I had used to cover the board. As I go on talking to the audience, I feel myself crumpling this film into a ball in my hands. Even so, when the next performance starts and I walk over to that blackboard, the numbers I had erased are liable to turn up again. If they alternate in a way that's even vaguely like the order in one of the previous performances, I might not catch myself in time and would read off the chart of numbers that had been written there before.

(From a letter of 1939.)

How was S. to deal with this? During the early stages, his attempts to work out a technique of forgetting were of an extremely simple nature. Why, he reasoned, couldn't he use some external means to help him forget—write down what he no longer wished to remember. This may strike others as odd, but it was a natural enough conclusion for S. "People jot things down so they'll remember them," he said. "This seemed ridiculous to me, so I decided

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to tackle the problem my own way." As he saw it, once he had written a thing down, he would have no need to remember it; but if he were without means of writing it down, he'd commit it to memory.

Writing something down means I'll know I won't have to remember it . . . So I started doing this with small matters like phone numbers, last names, errands of one sort or another. But I got nowhere, for in my mind I continued to see what I'd written . . . Then I tried writing all the notes on identical kinds of paper, using the same pencil each time. But it still didn't work.

He went further and started to discard and then burn the slips of paper on which he had jotted down things he wished to forget. Here for the first time we have evidence of something we shall have occasion to return to later in this account: that S.'s richly figurative imagination was not sharply cut off from reality; rather, he turned to objects in the external world when he needed a means to work out some mental operation.

The "magical act of burning" he tried proved of no use to him. And after he had burned a piece of paper with some numbers he wanted to forget and discovered he could still see traces of the numbers on the charred embers, he was desperate. Not even

fire could wipe out the traces he wanted to obliterate!

The problem of forgetting, which had not been solved by his naïve attempt to burn his notes, became a torment for him. Just when he thought a solution was unattainable, however, something occurred which proved effective, though it remained as unfathomable to him as it did to those of us who were studying him.

One evening—it was the 23rd of April—I was quite exhausted from having given three performances and was wondering how I'd ever get through the fourth. There before me I could see the charts of numbers appearing from the first three performances. It was a terrible problem. I thought: I'll just take a quick look and see if the first chart of numbers is still there. I was afraid somehow that it wouldn't be. I both did and didn't want it to appear . . . And then I thought: the chart of numbers isn't turning up now and it's clear why—it's because I don't want it to! Aha! That means if I don't want the chart to show up it won't. And all it took was for me to realize this!

Odd as it may seem, this brought results. It may very well be that S. had become fixated on an *absence of images*, and that had something to do with it. Possibly, too, his attention had been diverted, or the image was inhibited, and the added

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effect of autosuggestion was enough to destroy it. It seems pointless to conjecture about a phenomenon that has remained inexplicable. What we do have is evidence of the results it achieved.

At that moment I felt I was free. The realization that I had some guarantee against making mistakes gave me more confidence. I began to speak more freely, could even permit myself the luxury of pausing when I felt like it, for I knew that if I didn't want an image to appear, it wouldn't. I felt simply wonderful . . .

This just about exhausts our information on S.'s phenomenal memory: the role synesthesia played in it; his technique of using images on the one hand or of negating them (the mechanisms involved here still as strange and difficult to understand as ever). All of which brings us to another side of this story which we will turn to now.

We have discussed S.'s habits of perception and recall: the amazing precision of his memory; the tenacious grip that images, once evoked, had on his mind. We have also observed the peculiar structure of these images and the operations S. had to perform on them to make them serve his purposes. There remains for us to explore S.'s inner world, to get some idea of his personality and his manner of thinking.

What impact did the various facets of S.'s memory

which we have described have on his grasp of things, on the particular world he lived in? Were his habits of thought like other people's, or were there qualities in the man himself, in his behavior and personality, that were quite unique?

Here begins an account of phenomena so amazing that we will many times be left with the feeling little Alice had after she slipped through the looking glass and found herself in a strange wonderland.