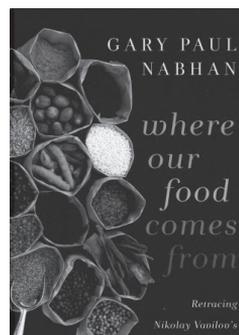


New book about the life and work of Nikolay Vavilov

MARIANNA FENZI

Centre Koyrè, École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) Paris, France;
marianna.fenzi@gmail.com

There are many reasons to review a book about the life and work of Nikolay Vavilov⁸. What leads us to do it today is closely related to the fate of the Pavlovsk experimental station, Vavilov's horticultural garden. There, where thousands of plant varieties are cultivated, property speculation is likely to take the place of the huge "living collection" of crop biodiversity. The conservation of crop biodiversity, a key element for the future of agriculture, always had a complex history. Indeed, another collection introduced by Nikolai Vavilov, the gene-bank in St. Petersburg, has already been threatened. The heroic deeds of the institute's keepers to save the gene-bank have become legendary; these men preferred to starve to death rather than feed on the seed collections gathered by the great Russian botanist and geneticist Nikolai Vavilov. It is with the moving chronicle of those days that Gary Paul Nabhan's book starts off, introducing us to the life and work of Vavilov.



Nikolai Vavilov was born in 1887 in Moscow. A young agronomist and geneticist, he set up the first project of exploration and conservation of plant genetic resources. Combining ethnography, genetics and ecology, his holistic approach led him to track down the geographic origins of cultivated plants and explore factors that allow them to adapt to their environment.

However, soon after Vavilov's institutional success in the 1920s, Stalin and the party bureaucrats considered Vavilov's genetic research program elitist and of very little direct benefit for Russian agriculture. In a background of famine, Vavilov's slow and complicated approach as well as his good relations with Western geneticists, made him a perfect scapegoat blamed for the difficulties encountered by the Soviet agricultural policy.

Attacked by Trofim Lysenko, one of the regime's favorite agronomists in 1930s, Vavilov ended his days imprisoned in Saratov where he died in 1943. Nabhan, an ethnobiologist at the University of Arizona and founder of Slow Food USA, tells us about the journey he made on the footsteps of Vavilov, reviving his memory and reconstructing his research activity with passionate devotion. One of the first photographs of Vavilov reproduced in the book, shows him in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1936 in front of a table covered with grapes. This picture reminds us of the long and tragic journey of a mass of starving people to this mythical city where bread was to be found, as described by Neverov in *Tachkent, the City of Plenty*. These two images symbolize the battle engaged by one of the main challenges of that time, which Vavilov throughout the five continents in search of the sources of our food and ended up to represent: guaranteeing food security.

Continuing his journey. The author tries, in a perhaps slightly anachronistic way, to discover in the work of Vavilov elements that are present in modern concepts of use and conservation and use of crop biodiversity in the work of Vavilov. He highlights how the geneticist was probably the first to articulate the concept of "loss of agricultural biodiversity", coming to the conclusion that "agricultural biodiversity is the cornerstone of better food security for mankind".

⁸Where Our Food Comes From, Retracing Nikolay Vavilov's Quest to End Famine / ed. by Gary P. Nabhan. Washington: Islandpress, 2008. 214 p.

Nabhan therefore suggests that Vavilov held a pioneering vision. Indeed, during his world-wide missions, Vavilov considered indigenous agricultural practices as key elements in building a bio-cultural heritage, asserting that plant richness is closely linked to cultural and linguistic diversity. Such an idea was probably already introducing a germ of a more evolutionary and dynamic view of life. Nabhan does not limit himself to emphasizing the dimension of Vavilov's scientific contribution; he also uses Vavilov's travel notes as "very detailed snapshots", allowing interesting comparisons of the environmental changes that have occurred since Vavilov's mission up until his own. Like Vavilov, Nabhan traveled through several countries: he enjoyed the smell of wild apples from Kazakhstan, crossed the Ethiopian highlands and arrived in Mexico, where in 1931 Vavilov could take in his arms two "interfertile" plant sprouts in his arms, maize and its wild relative *Teosinte*, giving us one of his best pictures.

Without breaking the legendary frame built around the scientist, Nabhan is compelled to simplify a very complicated historical situation, therefore risking flattening the controversy among geneticists to an ordinary political fight of the Stalinist period (well developed in the work of Nikolai Krementsov). However, through these pages the author offers us the opportunity to see Vavilov's legacy from several points of view and shows how his "journey" can and must still be pursued.

Today this book has a particular meaning: through Vavilov's history and that of the Russian Institute of Agriculture and of the Pavlovsk station, we are able to appraise the efforts of hundreds of people working to preserve our food memory. However maintaining crop biodiversity is not a recognized priority. During the above mentioned siege of Leningrad the Hermitage collections were carefully stored away from the Nazi threat, but the collection at VIR, left to its fate, was in danger of disappearing. Today this institute is endangered once more: a property speculation risks to destroy something that should deserve the same attention accorded to Hermitage masterpieces seventy years ago. The thousands of varieties kept in the Pavlovsk station not only represent a heritage to be preserved, they also represent our knowledge of nature, our relationship with the world. The selection of crop varieties is an "artifact" that concerns us all, it is the result of the relation between human practices and natural processes. The collection of Pavlovsk, with its hundreds of plant varieties is a collective work of mankind. For this reason, to destroy this memory is to eliminate a work of accumulation of knowledge and experience, a historical process that tells a less explored story of mankind.

От парусно-моторных ботов до научно-исследовательских судов

В.Г. Смирнов

Санкт-Петербургский филиал Института истории естествознания и техники им. С.И. Вавилова
РАН, Санкт-Петербург, Россия; sam1956@mail.ru

Исследование океанов и морей трудно представить без участия исследовательских судов. И хотя активное освоение космического пространства позволяет осуществлять дистанционное зондирование Земли с целью ее исследования (в том числе