

How Reasoning Mind Came About

Alexander R. Khachatryan

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For generations, education has been of primary importance in both my wife's family and in mine; a sense of respect and admiration for highly educated people was always in the air in our households. We learned early on that success and ultimate happiness in life were largely determined by how interesting and original the people who surrounded us were. And it is education that makes these people what they are; we dreamed about being just like them. Our values were shaped by the extraordinary individuals that visited our parents when we were little kids. We learned our best lessons sitting at endless dinners and breathlessly listening to adults talk about things we could neither imagine nor fully understand; these were the lessons of intellectual alchemy – we witnessed the miracles of fascinating and original thoughts appearing from, as it first seemed, a meaningless chat.

Books were always worshiped at home. At that time, good books were hard to get – they couldn't just be purchased in stores. To obtain a collection of good books, our parents had to get up in the middle of the night and stand in line, even then with uncertain results. We read a lot, learning from books what we could not learn through communication with people around us.

Looking back I ask myself the question, "What made us strive for knowledge and pursue the best education we could get, appreciate intelligence and creativity, admire thinkers, prominent scientists, world-class writers, and artists?" We absorbed these values from the culture of intellectuality and art that was created and nourished by the social layer to which we belonged and especially by those who influenced us the most – our parents and friends.

Our family came to the United States when my son George, who is now sixteen years old, was five. Giving George an opportunity to grow up, develop and live in a truly free country was the main reason why we left the Soviet Union. We could have provided our son with a good education back in Russia, but whether or not he would have been able to realize his full potential in that country was something beyond his or our control. All we brought with us was \$700, three suitcases, and 50 boxes of books; our only real asset was education. My wife Julia had a master's degree in petroleum engineering, while I had an M.S. in applied mathematics and a Ph.D. in physics and mathematics with specialization in geophysics. Immigration is never easy, but we had a lot of trust in the American system, where hard work is rewarded no matter where you come from.

Immigrating to the United States worked great for Julia's and my careers. First, I did research and taught at Texas A&M University for a couple of years. Then, we partnered in founding our own successful business – a petroleum consulting company active in providing management, engineering, and information technology services. Unfortunately, things did not go as smoothly for George; giving him an education that matched our standards became a major challenge.

When we were leaving the Soviet Union, we were not very concerned upon hearing that the elementary and secondary school system in the US left much to be desired. After all, we knew that American universities were the best in the world, which meant that the educational system

caught up after children finished high school. Besides, we were told there were many good private schools to choose from if we became unhappy with our public school.

Seven years later, by the age of 12, George had been in seven different schools – three public and four private, although we had moved only once. The experience was absolutely shocking. The main thing we learned was that public and private schools were not very different when it came to academic programs. Both systems teach children simple skills (reading, writing, math) and scattered tidbits of trivial knowledge in science and the humanities. What's worse is that we found ourselves in an "educational vacuum." First, being smart and well educated was not cool among children. Math and science were considered boring, and if a student liked to read, then he or she was immediately labeled a nerd. This, of course, created an environment where children were strongly discouraged from becoming thinkers, readers, researchers, and innovators – i.e. *intellectuals*. Second, since the life style in this country makes it very difficult for parents to devote enough time to their children, children are left without a source of intellectual stimulation, whether from friends, books, or parents.

Julia and I were committed to persevering – we felt that passing our family traditions and values on to the next generation was worth the struggle. With our help and continuous guidance, George worked hard accumulating knowledge and developing his intellectual and artistic abilities; we feel that – not because of the system, but despite it – we have given him a truly good education. But what makes us as parents most happy is that George has developed a taste for the things that have real value in life – an appreciation for knowledge, art, and creativity; the foundations for his success in life have been laid.

Our family's experience has deepened my concern with K-12 education in the United States. If creating a productive educational environment for George was such a problem for parents with our background, what chances have children in disadvantaged families? How much talent remains unrealized in our society just because timely help is not available? How many children grow up in the dark, not knowing how full of light and wonderful their lives can be?

We sat down with George and concluded that if we managed to educate one child, perhaps we could think of a way to help others as well. I had come from a society where many people practiced the culture of intellectuality, and this gave me personal experience and knowledge about what needed to be done. On the other hand, George, being a representative of American teenagers, was willing to help with ideas on how to design the product in such a way that it could be sold to his peers.

George and I worked together on developing the concept of the *Reasoning Mind (RM)* educational environment. We believe that the idea of an Internet club where children can interact under the guidance of creative and caring adults is the way to go. Education is all about challenges of mind and clashes of ideas, and you bet we can make it a fascinating experience.