

A Conversation with Ildar Ibragimov

Peter J. Bickel and Lucien Le Cam

Ildar Abdulovich Ibragimov was born in 1932 in Leningrad. In 1956, he obtained his first degree in mathematics from Leningrad University. In 1967 he was awarded the Doctorate in Physical and Mathematical Sciences, also at Leningrad University. Within two years, he was named to a chair in Probability at Leningrad. In 1970 he was awarded the Lenin Prize jointly with Linnik, Prokhorov and Rozanov. After Linnik's death in 1972, he became Director of the Laboratory of Statistical Methods of the Leningrad Branch of the Steklov Mathematical Institute, a position he continues to hold. He was named Wald Lecturer for 1989 by the Institute of Mathematical Statistics and delivered his lectures in early August 1989 at the Annual Meeting of the Institute in Washington. The following interview took place in late August 1989 at the Department of Statistics of the University of California in Berkeley. We have chosen to meddle as little as possible with Professor Ibragimov's vigorous but at times unpolished English. Nevertheless, we have taken the liberty of occasionally clarifying Professor Ibragimov's remarks by adding in brackets some explanatory phrases.

1. THE EARLY YEARS

Le Cam: I hope you don't mind, but we wanted to ask you some personal questions, and one of the questions that intrigues me is your name, Ibragimov: it's not typical Russian.

Ibragimov: It's not a typical Russian name. Actually I'm not Russian because my mother is a Kazan Tartar and my father is Bashkir and so it is the name of my father. Ibragimov means the son of Ibragim. But I was born in Leningrad. You know, in Russia, we have many different people mixed together.

Le Cam: But how did that happen to come about? Your parents must have moved to Leningrad.

Ibragimov: I don't know precisely how it was. My mother had been graduated from Kazan University; she was a doctor. My father studied in the Forest Academy at Leningrad. He finished there. I don't know precisely where they met, but then they lived together in Leningrad. My father gave lectures in the Forest Academy. My mother worked as a doctor. And so I was born in Leningrad in '32.

Le Cam: Where did you study?

Ibragimov: You mean at school or university?

Le Cam: Both.

Ibragimov: By "school" it is difficult to say because in my life I changed a lot of schools. You know it was war time and my parents moved from one place to another. I moved with them, so it seems in my life

I changed from six schools, but it was not bad. Then I came to Leningrad University, and I was graduated from Leningrad University.

Bickel: How did you come to end up as a probabilist and statistician?

Ibragimov: Well, I think it is mostly because of Linnik. We had in our University some kind of contest for students in the solution of problems. They set up a special committee consisting of a few professors and a few senior students and they posed problems for junior students, for the first and second course at university. It happened that in one such contest I was first. Linnik at this time was the chairman of the committee. He invited me to his home. We just talked, and he gave me a few books to read, one of which was Hardy's book about number theory, the second was Bohr's book about almost periodic functions, and it seems to me there may have been some other book. But he talked with me about probability. I began to do probability, and so it was a beginning.

Le Cam: The first paper that I have seen of yours was in 1959.

Ibragimov: No. The first paper was '56. It was about strong unimodality. So I was a student at this time.

Le Cam: How did you come to write that book with Linnik on sums of independent random variables?

Ibragimov: It was Linnik's way to do things. Once he invited me and said "Well you know Ildar, I wrote a part of our common book. So now it's your task to finish the book." Well, I was a little bit surprised, but you know I never have enough courage to

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