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IN MEMORIAM

A life beneath the surface: Prof. Dr. Nelli Grigoryevna Sergeeva (1940–2025)

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Dr. Nelli Grigoryevna Sergeeva's life reads like the long arc of twentieth-century science itself — born in the turbulence of the 1940s, shaped by hardship, and defined by perseverance in the pursuit of knowledge. She entered the world on November 20, 1940, in Ashgabat, then part of the Turkmenistan of USSR, at the onset of global war.

Figure 1. Nelli G. Sergeeva at the marine biology laboratory of the Faculty of Fisheries, Sinop University (photo by D. Ürkmez 2010).

Her early years unfolded in the shadow of loss: her father, Lieutenant Grigory Sergeev, went to the front and never returned, leaving Nelli and her mother to survive the long years of deprivation that followed. Her childhood in Alma-Ata was marked by poverty and resilience. Her mother, Maria Semyonovna, with only minimal schooling, worked double and triple shifts in a defence plant to provide for them. These experiences forged the self-discipline, independence, and empathy that would later distinguish Nelli Sergeeva's scientific career. She grew up without toys, finding wonder instead in the small living world around her — the creatures of the yard, the "funeral ceremonies" she and other children performed for mice, and the natural rhythms of the changing seasons.

Education became her gateway to another world. A gifted student, she was fascinated by language and science alike, and for a time considered becoming a German translator. But in postwar Kazakhstan, opportunities were limited. She eventually chose biology, inspired partly by friends who enrolled in the same preparatory courses at Kazakh State University. Sergeeva entered the Faculty of Biology and Soil Science at the S. M. Kirov Kazakh State University in 1960, an era when Soviet higher education was charged with both ideological rigor and genuine scientific enthusiasm. The young woman from Alma-Ata, who once doubted her prospects, quickly distinguished herself through dedication and curiosity. Her early university years were shadowed by tragedy: in 1961, while participating in the Virgin Lands campaign, she suffered a severe leg injury in an agricultural accident, leaving her temporarily disabled. The episode nearly ended her academic career. Yet even during months of hospitalization, she refused to give up her goal. She taught herself from borrowed textbooks and returned to the university on crutches, determined to complete her degree. It was during these years that she discovered the power of mentorship — and the depth of her own resolve. She credited her professor, Dr. Nagimé Zamaleevna Khusainova, with awakening her passion for zoology and parasitology. The professor's empathy and precision became a model Sergeeva carried throughout her career.

Her academic interests soon turned toward hydrobiology. After her third year, she undertook a field practice in Sevastopol at the A. O. Kovalevsky Institute of Biology of the Southern Seas (IBSS) — an encounter that would define her life's direction. Under the guidance of Professor Vladimir Alekseevich Vodyanitsky, director of the institute, and Dr. Marta Ivanovna Kiseleva, head of the benthos department, she studied the biology of the Black Sea polychaete *Nephtys hombergii*. The sea captivated her; its smell, its living sediments, and the mystery of the unseen world beneath the waves. When she completed her degree in 1966 with a specialization in ichthyology and hydrobiology, her course work already showed the signs of original observation. The young scientist from Central Asia had found her intellectual home by the sea.

From Kazakhstan to Sevastopol: The Scientist Emerges

Her first professional appointment was at the Kazakh Research Institute of Fisheries (KazNIIRKh) in Balkhash, where she studied the ecology of freshwater benthos and the effects of industrial pollution on aquatic life. Her work was immediately recognized for its methodological rigor. Within six months she was promoted from laboratory assistant to junior researcher — an early indication of her drive and independence. Yet even this promising start could not compete with her longing for the sea. In 1968 she received an invitation from her former mentor, Dr. Kiseleva, to apply for postgraduate study at IBSS. That same year, she entered the institute's graduate program in Sevastopol under the supervision of the distinguished Academician Vodyanitsky, with a research focus on free-living marine nematodes. The young researcher quickly became known for her perseverance in the laboratory. She collected and analysed sediment samples with her own hands, often washing and sieving them outdoors under the eyes of curious beachgoers. Her dedication to methodical, precise work would characterize her entire scientific life. In 1974, she defended her Ph.D. thesis, Fauna and Some Ecological Aspects of Free-Living Nematodes of the Black Sea, marking the beginning of a five-decade exploration of the invisible but essential organisms inhabiting the seabed.

Voyages, Discovery, and the Making of a Marine Biologist

The 1970s and 1980s were an era of extraordinary scientific growth for Sergeeva and for IBSS. As the institute expanded its international collaborations, she became a key participant in numerous oceanographic expeditions aboard research vessels such as Akademik Kovalevsky, Professor Vodyanitsky, and Professor Kolesnikov. These voyages took her across the Black, Mediterranean, and Adriatic Seas, and even into cooperative projects with Western European colleagues. During one voyage to Venice, she presented a sediment corer of her own design — an elegant, practical device that allowed sampling of undisturbed layers of seabed. Her Italian counterparts were astonished at its simplicity and effectiveness. This episode encapsulated her scientific philosophy: inventive yet grounded, meticulous yet unpretentious. Her participation in these expeditions fostered professional connections that would last a lifetime. She became an active member of the International Association of Meiobenthologists, collaborating with leading marine scientists such as R. P. Higgins and J. H. Tietjen (United States), A. J. Gooday (United Kingdom), and Ilse Bartsch (Germany). These relationships helped integrate Black Sea research into the global conversation on marine biodiversity. In 1988, Sergeeva achieved what she later described as one of the greatest adventures of her life: certification as a Research Hydronaut of the USSR. After completing the training program and medical examinations, she joined the deep-sea expedition aboard the manned submersible 'Benthos-300'. Over the course of 80 hours of underwater observation along the Caucasian and Crimean coasts, she recorded benthic organisms, geological structures, and even archaeological artifacts — a torpedo, a sunken airplane, ancient amphorae. The experience profoundly shaped her scientific worldview. Seeing the seafloor

firsthand, she wrote, "was to look into the face of time itself." These dives deepened her conviction that life, in some form, could exist even within the Black Sea's hydrogen sulfide zone — a hypothesis that would become the cornerstone of her later research.

Discovery in the Depths: Redefining the "Lifeless Zone"
Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Dr. Sergeeva's work increasingly focused on the anoxic layers of the Black Sea, long considered sterile by marine science. Her careful sampling and microscopic analyses revealed a startling truth: even in the dark, oxygen-deprived muds, she found living organisms — protozoa and metazoa moving, feeding, and reproducing in conditions thought impossible for life. Her findings challenged one of the central dogmas of oceanography. In 2000 she defended her doctoral dissertation, Zonal Distribution of Meiobenthos and Its Most Important Component—Free-Living Nematodes in the Black Sea, at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Her scientific advisor, Professor Viktor Evgenievich Zaika, initially sceptical, became convinced by the weight of evidence and later joined her in expanding the theoretical framework for life under anoxic conditions. The discovery of active benthic fauna at depths of 300 meters revolutionized the understanding of the Black Sea ecosystem. It led to her identification of several previously unknown species, including *Pseudopenillia bathyalis* (2001), the type species of a new genus and family of Cladocera (Korovchinsky & Sergeeva, 2008). Subsequent collaboration with Dr. N. M. Korovchinsky of the Russian Academy of Sciences confirmed the establishment of the new family Pseudopenillidae, providing definitive proof that the Black Sea's deep layers were not lifeless but uniquely adapted.

Over her career, Sergeeva described 27 new species and 4 new genera of nematodes, and recorded dozens more taxa previously unknown in the region. She extended her interests to Tardigrada, Gastrotricha, and Foraminifera, often working in collaboration with international colleagues. Her joint monograph with O. V. Anikeeva, documenting 16 valid species of soft-shelled Foraminifera and more than 80 morphotypes, remains an authoritative reference (Sergeeva and Anikeeva, 2024). Beyond taxonomy, her work carried philosophical resonance: she saw the persistence of life in toxic, lightless depths as an emblem of endurance — both biological and human. Dr. Sergeeva's scientific achievements were matched by her service to her institution and her dedication to younger scientists. From 2000 to 2013 she headed the Department of Benthos Ecology at IBSS, transforming it into one of the leading centres for marine biodiversity research in Eastern Europe. Her office, once part of the old "flow-through tank" where she had worked as a student, became a gathering place for students and collaborators. Her mentorship extended far beyond formal supervision. Many of her proteges — including O. V. Anikeeva, E. N. Ivanova, T. N. Revkova, Kh. O. Kharkevich, and D. Ürkmez went on to become respected scientists in their own right. For thirteen years she served as scientific secretary of the specialized council for defending doctoral and candidate dissertations in hydrobiology, a role that

required both administrative precision and intellectual integrity. Students remembered her generosity and her habit of turning small observations into lessons on curiosity. She encouraged them to "read the sediment as you would read a book," reminding them that discovery lay as much in attention as in technology. Her lectures and mentoring combined the discipline of a scientist with the humanity of a teacher who had once struggled herself.

Challenges and Resilience

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought hardship to many scientists, and Sergeeva was no exception. During the 1990s, when salaries were delayed and research funding nearly vanished, she refused to abandon her work. To sustain her family, she temporarily took part in small-scale trading voyages and even agricultural projects involving earthworm-based humus production — an ironic echo of her early studies in soil and ecology. Despite these difficulties, she continued publishing, conducting fieldwork, and supporting colleagues. "Science," she once wrote, "is not a profession one can leave; it is the way one sees the world." Her persistence during those years helped preserve the continuity of marine biological research in Sevastopol. When the Institute of Biology of the Southern Seas became the Institute of Marine Biological Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences in the 2010s, she remained at its core, serving as chief researcher and later advisor to the director. In 2018, she joined the newly established Laboratory of Species Identification Problems, where she continued to analyse deep-sea samples and mentor staff well into her seventies.

International Collaborations and Recognition

Dr. Sergeeva's professional career was distinguished by a remarkable breadth of international involvement. She represented her institute in numerous multinational projects, including the UNESCO–IUGS–IGCP–INQUA programs on sea-level change, the EU's HERMES, HYPOX, PERSEUS, and CoCoNet initiatives, and the Census of Marine Life. Her expertise in meiobenthos and sediment ecology made her an indispensable partner in studies of hypoxic and anoxic marine environments across Europe. Her service extended to environmental policy and biodiversity conservation, notably through her participation in the "Assessment of the Need for Biodiversity Conservation in Crimea" under the Biodiversity Support Program (USAID, 1996–1997). Her publications, totaling over 150 scientific papers, chapters, and monographs, were widely cited in marine biology and ecological journals. Recognition followed: the badge of "Winner of Socialist Competition" (1973), the medal "Veteran of Labor" (1987), commendations from both the National and Russian Academies of Sciences, and in 2019, her portrait was placed on the City Honor Board of Sevastopol. Yet those who knew her best recall that she valued personal correspondence and collaborative success far more than official awards. Beyond her professional achievements, Nelli Sergeeva was known for her grace, discipline, and quiet humour. Colleagues remember her early mornings at the microscope, her detailed field notebooks filled with sketches, and her willingness

to listen to every student's idea, no matter how simple and basic. She viewed science as both art and moral duty. Her favourite quotation — "Wonder is the beginning of knowledge" — guided her approach to research and to life. Wonder, for Sergeeva, was not an immaturity but mindfulness: the ability to see value in what others overlooked. Over more than half a century of uninterrupted research, Dr. Nelli G. Sergeeva transformed the understanding of life in the Black Sea and beyond. Her discoveries of living organisms in the anoxic depths reshaped marine ecology, while her taxonomic contributions provided the foundation for future biodiversity studies. Her influence extends through her students, her colleagues, and the thousands of samples she analysed, now preserved in scientific collections across Europe. Her work reminds us that the sea, like the human spirit, conceals depths still unexplored.

She passed away in Sevastopol in 2025, the city where she had found both her scientific purpose and her intellectual home. In the quiet halls of the institute, her name endures — inscribed in research papers, remembered in conversations, and echoed in the laboratories she once filled with life and laughter. Every layer of the seabed conceals its own history, she once said.

Our duty is to listen. In listening, Dr. Nelli Grigoryevna Sergeeva helped the world hear what the deep waters of the Black Sea had been whispering all along.

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