**(Contd…4)** 2

I have sufficiently spoken of the gloom and the glory of exile in my Russian novels, and especially in the best of them, Dar (recently published in English as The Gift); but a quick recapitulation here may be convenient. With a very few exceptions, all liberal-minded creative forces—poets, novelists, critics, historians, philosophers and so on—had left Lenin’s and Stalin’s Russia. Those who had not were either withering away there or adulterating their gifts by complying with the political demands of the state. What the Tsars had never been able to achieve, namely the complete curbing of minds to the government’s will, was achieved by the Bolsheviks in no time after the main contingent of the intellectuals had escaped abroad or had been destroyed. The lucky group of expatriates could now follow their pursuits with such utter impunity that, in fact, they sometimes asked themselves if the sense of enjoying absolute mental freedom was not due to their working in an absolute void. True, there was among émigrés a sufficient number of good readers to warrant the publication, in Berlin, Paris, and other towns, of Russian books and periodicals on a comparatively large scale; but since none of those writings could circulate within the Soviet Union, the whole thing acquired a certain air of fragile unreality. The number of titles was more impressive than the number of copies any given work sold, and the names of the publishing houses—Orion, Cosmos, Logos, and so forth—had the hectic, unstable and slightly illegal appearance that firms issuing astrological or facts-of-life literature have. In serene retrospect, however, and judged by artistic and scholarly standards alone, the books produced in vacuo by émigré writers seem today, whatever their individual faults, more permanent and more suitable for human consumption than the slavish, singularly provincial and conventional streams of political consciousness that came during those same years from the pens of young Soviet authors whom a fatherly state provided with ink, pipes and pullovers.

The editor of the daily Rul’ (and the publisher of my first books), Iosif Vladimirovich Hessen, allowed me with great leniency to fill his poetry section with my unripe rhymes. Blue evenings in Berlin, the corner chestnut in flower, lightheadedness, poverty, love, the tangerine tinge of premature shoplights, and an animal aching yearn for the still fresh reek of Russia—all this was put into meter, copied out in longhand and carted off to the editor’s office, where myopic I. V. would bring the new poem close to his face and after this brief, more or less tactual, act of cognition put it down on his desk. By 1928, my novels were beginning to bring a little money in German translations, and in the spring of 1929, you and I went butterfly hunting in the Pyrenees. But only at the end of the nineteen-thirties did we leave Berlin for good, although long before that I used to take trips to Paris for public readings of my stuff.

Quite a feature of émigré life, in keeping with its itinerant and dramatic character, was the abnormal frequency of those literary readings in private houses or hired halls. The various types of performers stand out very distinctly in the puppet show going on in my mind. There was the faded actress, with eyes like precious stones, who having pressed for a moment a clenched handkerchief to a feverish mouth, proceeded to evoke nostalgic echoes of the Moscow Art Theatre by subjecting some famous piece of verse to the action, half dissection and half caress, of her slow limpid voice. There was the hopelessly second-rate author whose voice trudged through a fog of rhythmic prose, and one could watch the nervous trembling of his poor, clumsy but careful fingers every time he tucked the page he had finished under those to come, so that his manuscript retained throughout the reading its appalling and pitiful thickness. There was the young poet in whom his envious brethren could not help seeing a disturbing streak of genius as striking as the stripe of a skunk; erect on the stage, pale and glazed-eyed, with nothing in his hands to anchor him to this world, he would throw back his head and deliver his poem in a highly irritating, rolling chant and stop abruptly at the end, slamming the door of the last line and waiting for applause to fill the hush. And there was the old cher maître dropping pearl by pearl an admirable tale he had read innumerable times, and always in the same manner, wearing the expression of fastidious distaste that his nobly furrowed face had in the frontispiece of his collected works.

I suppose it would be easy for a detached observer to poke fun at all those hardly palpable people who imitated in foreign cities a dead civilization, the remote, almost legendary, almost Sumerian mirages of St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1916 (which, even then, in the twenties and thirties, sounded like 1916–1900 B.C.). But at least they were rebels as most major Russian writers had been ever since Russian literature had existed, and true to this insurgent condition which their sense of justice and liberty craved for as strongly as it had done under the oppression of the Tsars, émigrés regarded as monstrously un-Russian and subhuman the behavior of pampered authors in the Soviet Union, the servile response on the part of those authors to every shade of every governmental decree; for the art of prostration was growing there in exact ratio to the increasing efficiency of first Lenin’s, then Stalin’s political police, and the successful Soviet writer was the one whose fine ear caught the soft whisper of an official suggestion long before it had become a blare.

Owing to the limited circulation of their works abroad, even the older generation of émigré writers, whose fame had been solidly established in pre-Revolution Russia, could not hope that their books would make a living for them. Writing a weekly column for an émigré paper was never quite sufficient to keep body and pen together. Now and then translations into other languages brought in an unexpected scoop; but, otherwise, grants from various émigré organizations, earnings from public readings and lavish private charity were responsible for prolonging elderly authors’ lives. Younger, less known but more adaptable writers supplemented chance subsidies by engaging in various jobs. I remember teaching English and tennis. Patiently I thwarted the persistent knack Berlin businessmen had of pronouncing “business” so as to rhyme with “dizziness”; and like a slick automaton, under the slow-moving clouds of a long summer day, on dusty courts, I ladled ball after ball over the net to their tanned, bob-haired daughters. I got five dollars (quite a sum during the inflation in Germany) for my Russian Alice in Wonderland. I helped compile a Russian grammar for foreigners in which the first exercise began with the words Madam, ya doktor, vot banan (Madam, I am the doctor, here is a banana). Best of all, I used to compose for a daily émigré paper, the Berlin Rul’, the first Russian crossword puzzles, which I baptized krestoslovitsï. I find it strange to recall that freak existence. Deeply beloved of blurbists is the list of more or less earthy professions that a young author (writing about Life and Ideas—which are so much more important, of course, than mere “art”) has followed: newspaper boy, soda jerk, monk, wrestler, foreman in a steel mill, bus driver and so on. Alas, none of these callings has been mine.

My passion for good writing put me in close contact with various Russian authors abroad. I was young in those days and much more keenly interested in literature than I am now. Current prose and poetry, brilliant planets and pale galaxies, flowed by the casement of my garret night after night. There were independent authors of diverse age and talent, and there were groupings and cliques within which a number of young or youngish writers, some of them very gifted, clustered around a philosophizing critic. The most important of these mystagogues combined intellectual talent and moral mediocrity, an uncanny sureness of taste in modern Russian poetry and a patchy knowledge of Russian classics. His group believed that neither a mere negation of Bolshevism nor the routine ideals of Western democracies were sufficient to build a philosophy upon which émigré literature could lean. They thirsted for a creed as a jailed drug addict thirsts for his pet heaven. Rather pathetically, they envied Parisian Catholic groups for the seasoned subtleties that Russian mysticism so obviously lacked. Dostoevskian drisk could not compete with neo-Thomist thought; but were there not other ways? The longing for a system of faith, a constant teetering on the brink of some accepted religion was found to provide a special satisfaction of its own. Only much later, in the forties, did some of those writers finally discover a definite slope down which to slide in a more or less genuflectory attitude. This slope was the enthusiastic nationalism that could call a state (Stalin’s Russia, in this case) good and lovable for no other reason than because its army had won a war. In the early thirties, however, the nationalistic precipice was only faintly perceived and the mystagogues were still enjoying the thrills of slippery suspension. In their attitude toward literature they were curiously conservative; with them soul-saving came first, logrolling next, and art last. A retrospective glance nowadays notes the surprising fact of these free belles-lettrists abroad aping fettered thought at home by decreeing that to be a representative of a group or an epoch was more important than to be an individual writer.

Vladislav Hodasevich used to complain, in the twenties and thirties, that young émigré poets had borrowed their art form from him while following the leading cliques in modish angoisse and soul-reshaping. I developed a great liking for this bitter man, wrought of irony and metallic-like genius, whose poetry was as complex a marvel as that of Tyutchev or Blok. He was, physically, of a sickly aspect, with contemptuous nostrils and beetling brows, and when I conjure him up in my mind he never rises from the hard chair on which he sits, his thin legs crossed, his eyes glittering with malevolence and wit, his long fingers screwing into a holder the half of a Caporal Vert cigarette. There are few things in modern world poetry comparable to the poems of his Heavy Lyre, but unfortunately for his fame the perfect frankness he indulged in when voicing his dislikes made him some terrible enemies among the most powerful critical coteries. Not all the mystagogues were Dostoevskian Alyoshas; there were also a few Smerdyakovs in the group, and Hodasevich’s poetry was played down with the thoroughness of a revengeful racket.

Another independent writer was Ivan Bunin. I had always preferred his little-known verse to his celebrated prose (their interrelation, within the frame of his work, recalls Hardy’s case). At the time I found him tremendously perturbed by the personal problem of aging. The first thing he said to me was to remark with satisfaction that his posture was better than mine, despite his being some thirty years older than I. He was basking in the Nobel prize he had just received and invited me to some kind of expensive and fashionable eating place in Paris for a heart-to-heart talk. Unfortunately I happen to have a morbid dislike for restaurants and cafés, especially Parisian ones—I detest crowds, harried waiters, Bohemians, vermouth concoctions, coffee, zakuski, floor shows and so forth. I like to eat and drink in a recumbent position (preferably on a couch) and in silence. Heart-to-heart talks, confessions in the Dostoevskian manner, are also not in my line. Bunin, a spry old gentleman, with a rich and unchaste vocabulary, was puzzled by my irresponsiveness to the hazel grouse of which I had had enough in my childhood and exasperated by my refusal to discuss eschatological matters. Toward the end of the meal we were utterly bored with each other. “You will die in dreadful pain and complete isolation,” remarked Bunin bitterly as we went toward the cloakroom. An attractive, frail-looking girl took the check for our heavy overcoats and presently fell with them in her embrace upon the low counter. I wanted to help Bunin into his raglan but he stopped me with a proud gesture of his open hand. Still struggling perfunctorily—he was now trying to help me—we emerged into the pallid bleakness of a Paris winter day. My companion was about to button his collar when a look of surprise and distress twisted his handsome features. Gingerly opening his overcoat, he began tugging at something under his armpit. I came to his assistance and together we finally dragged out of his sleeve my long woolen scarf which the girl had stuffed into the wrong coat. The thing came out inch by inch; it was like unwrapping a mummy and we kept slowly revolving around each other in the process, to the ribald amusement of three sidewalk whores. Then, when the operation was over, we walked on without a word to a street corner where we shook hands and separated. Subsequently we used to meet quite often, but always in the midst of other people, generally in the house of I. I. Fondaminski (a saintly and heroic soul who did more for Russian émigré literature than any other man and who died in a German prison). Somehow Bunin and I adopted a bantering and rather depressing mode of conversation, a Russian variety of American “kidding,” and this precluded any real commerce between us.

I met many other émigré Russian authors. I did not meet Poplavski who died young, a far violin among near balalaikas.

Go to sleep, O Morella, how awful are aquiline lives

His plangent tonalities I shall never forget, nor shall I ever forgive myself the ill-tempered review in which I attacked him for trivial faults in his unfledged verse. I met wise, prim, charming Aldanov; decrepit Kuprin, carefully carrying a bottle of vin ordinaire through rainy streets; Ayhenvald—a Russian version of Walter Pater—later killed by a trolleycar; Marina Tsvetaev, wife of a double agent, and poet of genius, who, in the late thirties, returned to Russia and perished there. But the author that interested me most was naturally Sirin. He belonged to my generation. Among the young writers produced in exile he was the loneliest and most arrogant one. Beginning with the appearance of his first novel in 1925 and throughout the next fifteen years, until he vanished as strangely as he had come, his work kept provoking an acute and rather morbid interest on the part of critics. Just as Marxist publicists of the eighties in old Russia would have denounced his lack of concern with the economic structure of society, so the mystagogues of émigré letters deplored his lack of religious insight and of moral preoccupation. Everything about him was bound to offend Russian conventions and especially that Russian sense of decorum which, for example, an American offends so dangerously today, when in the presence of Soviet military men of distinction he happens to lounge with both hands in his trouser pockets. Conversely, Sirin’s admirers made much, perhaps too much, of his unusual style, brilliant precision, functional imagery and that sort of thing. Russian readers who had been raised on the sturdy straightforwardness of Russian realism and had called the bluff of decadent cheats, were impressed by the mirrorlike angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences and by the fact that the real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech, which one critic has compared to “windows giving upon a contiguous world … a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train of thought.” Across the dark sky of exile, Sirin passed, to use a simile of a more conservative nature, like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness.

3

In the course of my twenty years of exile I devoted a prodigious amount of time to the composing of chess problems. A certain position is elaborated on the board, and the problem to be solved is how to mate Black in a given number of moves, generally two or three. It is a beautiful, complex and sterile art related to the ordinary form of the game only insofar as, say, the properties of a sphere are made use of both by a juggler in weaving a new act and by a tennis player in winning a tournament. Most chess players, in fact, amateurs and masters alike, are only mildly interested in these highly specialized, fanciful, stylish riddles, and though appreciative of a catchy problem would be utterly baffled if asked to compose one.

Inspiration of a quasi-musical, quasi-poetical, or to be quite exact, poetico-mathematical type, attends the process of thinking up a chess composition of that sort. Frequently, in the friendly middle of the day, on the fringe of some trivial occupation, in the idle wake of a passing thought, I would experience, without warning, a twinge of mental pleasure as the bud of a chess problem burst open in my brain, promising me a night of labor and felicity. It might be a new way of blending an unusual strategic device with an unusual line of defense; it might be a glimpse of the actual configuration of men that would render at last, with humor and grace, a difficult theme that I had despaired of expressing before; or it might be a mere gesture made in the mist of my mind by the various units of force represented by chessmen—a kind of swift dumb show, suggesting new harmonies and new conflicts; whatever it was, it belonged to an especially exhilarating order of sensation, and my only quarrel with it today is that the maniacal manipulation of carved figures, or of their mental counterparts, during my most ebullient and prolific years engulfed so much of the time I could have devoted to verbal adventure.

Experts distinguish several schools of the chess-problem art: the Anglo-American one that combines accurate construction with dazzling thematic patterns, and refuses to be bound by any conventional rules; the rugged splendor of the Teutonic school; the highly finished but unpleasantly slick and insipid products of the Czech style with its strict adherence to certain artificial conditions; the old Russian end-game studies, which attain the sparkling summits of the art, and the mechanical Soviet problem of the so-called “task” type, which replaces artistic strategy by the ponderous working of themes to their utmost capacity. Themes in chess, it may be explained, are such devices as forelaying, withdrawing, pinning, unpinning and so forth; but it is only when they are combined in a certain way that a problem is satisfying. Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy; and although in matters of construction I tried to conform, whenever possible, to classical rules, such as economy of force, unity, weeding out of loose ends, I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil.

It is one thing to conceive the main play of a composition and another to construct it. The strain on the mind is formidable; the element of time drops out of one’s consciousness altogether: the building hand gropes for a pawn in the box, holds it, while the mind still ponders the need for a foil or a stopgap, and when the fist opens, a whole hour, perhaps, has gone by, has burned to ashes in the incandescent cerebration of the schemer. The chessboard before him is a magnetic field, a system of stresses and abysses, a starry firmament. The bishops move over it like searchlights. This or that knight is a lever adjusted and tried, and readjusted and tried again, till the problem is tuned up to the necessary level of beauty and surprise. How often I have struggled to bind the terrible force of White’s queen so as to avoid a dual solution! It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of a problem’s value is due to the number of “tries”—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray. But whatever I can say about this matter of problem composing, I do not seem to convey sufficiently the ecstatic core of the process and its points of connection with various other, more overt and fruitful, operations of the creative mind, from the charting of dangerous seas to the writing of one of those incredible novels where the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients—rocks, and carbon, and blind throbbings. In the case of problem composition, the event is accompanied by a mellow physical satisfaction, especially when the chessmen are beginning to enact adequately, in a penultimate rehearsal, the composer’s dream. There is a feeling of snugness (which goes back to one’s childhood, to play-planning in bed, with parts of toys fitting into corners of one’s brain); there is the nice way one piece is ambushed behind another, within the comfort and warmth of an out-of-the-way square; and there is the smooth motion of a well-oiled and polished machine that runs sweetly at the touch of two forked fingers lightly lifting and lightly lowering a piece.

I remember one particular problem I had been trying to compose for months. There came a night when I managed at last to express that particular theme. It was meant for the delectation of the very expert solver. The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and discover its fairly simple, “thetic” solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme (exposing White’s King to checks), which the composer had taken the greatest pains to “plant” (with only one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having passed through this “antithetic” inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. The pleasant experience of the roundabout route (strange landscapes, gongs, tigers, exotic customs, the thrice-repeated circuit of a newly married couple around the sacred fire of an earthen brazier) would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit, and after that, his arrival at the simple key move would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight.

I remember slowly emerging from a swoon of concentrated chess thought, and there, on a great English board of cream and cardinal leather, the flawless position was at last balanced like a constellation. It worked. It lived. My Staunton chessmen (a twenty-year-old set given to me by my father’s Englished brother, Konstantin), splendidly massive pieces, of tawny or black wood, up to four and a quarter inches tall, displayed their shiny contours as if conscious of the part they played. Alas, if examined closely, some of the men were seen to be chipped (after traveling in their box through the fifty or sixty lodgings I had changed during those years); but the top of the king’s rook and the brow of the king’s knight still showed a small crimson crown painted upon them, recalling the round mark on a happy Hindu’s forehead.

A brooklet of time in comparison to its frozen lake on the chessboard, my watch showed half-past three. The season was May—mid-May, 1940. The day before, after months of soliciting and cursing, the emetic of a bribe had been administered to the right rat at the right office and had resulted finally in a visa de sortie which, in its turn, conditioned the permission to cross the Atlantic. All of a sudden, I felt that with the completion of my chess problem a whole period of my life had come to a satisfactory close. Everything around was very quiet; faintly dimpled, as it were, by the quality of my relief. Sleeping in the next room were you and our child. The lamp on my table was bonneted with blue sugarloaf paper (an amusing military precaution) and the resulting light lent a lunar tinge to the voluted air heavy with tobacco smoke. Opaque curtains separated me from blacked-out Paris. The headline of a newspaper drooping from the seat of a chair spoke of Hitler’s striking at the Low Countries.

I have before me the sheet of paper upon which, that night in Paris, I drew the diagram of the problem’s position. White: King on a7 (meaning first file, seventh rank), Queen on b6, Rooks on f4 and h5, Bishops on e4 and h8, Knights on d8 and e6, Pawns on b7 and g3; Black: King on e5, Rook on g7, Bishop on h6, Knights on e2 and g5, Pawns on c3, c6 and d7. White begins and mates in two moves. The false scent, the irresistible “try” is: Pawn to b8, becoming a knight, with three beautiful mates following in answer to disclosed checks by Black; but Black can defeat the whole brilliant affair by not checking White and making instead a modest dilatory move elsewhere on the board. In one corner of the sheet with the diagram, I notice a certain stamped mark that also adorns other papers and books I took out of France to America in May 1940. It is a circular imprint, in the ultimate tint of the spectrum—violet de bureau. In its center there are two capital letters of pica size, R.F., meaning of course République Française. Other letters in lesser type, running peripherally, spell Contrôle des Informations. However, it is only now, many years later, that the information concealed in my chess symbols, which that control permitted to pass, may be, and in fact is, divulged.

A Nansen passport picture taken in Paris in April 1940, of the author’s wife, Véra, and son Dmitri, aged five. A few weeks later, in May, the last chapter of our European period was to end as it ends in this book.

***Chapter 15 1***

THEY are passing, posthaste, posthaste, the gliding years—to use a soul-rending Horatian inflection. The years are passing, my dear, and presently nobody will know what you and I know. Our child is growing; the roses of Paestum, of misty Paestum, are gone; mechanically minded idiots are tinkering and tampering with forces of nature that mild mathematicians, to their own secret surprise, appear to have foreshadowed; so perhaps it is time we examined ancient snapshots, cave drawings of trains and planes, strata of toys in the lumbered closet.

We shall go still further back, to a morning in May 1934, and plot with respect to this fixed point the graph of a section of Berlin. There I was walking home, at 5 A.M., from the maternity hospital near Bayerischer Platz, to which I had taken you a couple of hours earlier. Spring flowers adorned the portraits of Hindenburg and Hitler in the window of a shop that sold frames and colored photographs. Leftist groups of sparrows were holding loud morning sessions in lilacs and limes. A limpid dawn had completely unsheathed one side of the empty street. On the other side, the houses still looked blue with cold, and various long shadows were gradually being telescoped, in the matter-of-fact manner young day has when taking over from night in a well-groomed, well-watered city, where the tang of tarred pavements underlies the sappy smells of shade trees; but to me the optical part of the business seemed quite new, like some unusual way of laying the table, because I had never seen that particular street at daybreak before, although, on the other hand, I had often passed there, childless, on sunny evenings.

In the purity and vacuity of the less familiar hour, the shadows were on the wrong side of the street, investing it with a sense of not inelegant inversion, as when one sees reflected in the mirror of a barbershop the window toward which the melancholy barber, while stropping his razor, turns his gaze (as they all do at such times), and, framed in that reflected window, a stretch of sidewalk shunting a procession of unconcerned pedestrians in the wrong direction, into an abstract world that all at once stops being droll and loosens a torrent of terror.

Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe. Something impels me to measure the consciousness of my love against such unimaginable and incalculable things as the behavior of nebulae (whose very remoteness seems a form of insanity), the dreadful pitfalls of eternity, the unknowledgeable beyond the unknown, the helplessness, the cold, the sickening involutions and interpenetrations of space and time. It is a pernicious habit, but I can do nothing about it. It can be compared to the uncontrollable flick of an insomniac’s tongue checking a jagged tooth in the night of his mouth and bruising itself in doing so but still persevering. I have known people who, upon accidentally touching something—a doorpost, a wall—had to go through a certain very rapid and systematic sequence of manual contacts with various surfaces in the room before returning to a balanced existence. It cannot be helped; I must know where I stand, where you and my son stand. When that slow-motion, silent explosion of love takes place in me, unfolding its melting fringes and overwhelming me with the sense of something much vaster, much more enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or energy in any imaginable cosmos, then my mind cannot but pinch itself to see if it is really awake. I have to make a rapid inventory of the universe, just as a man in a dream tries to condone the absurdity of his position by making sure he is dreaming. I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence.

Since, in my metaphysics, I am a confirmed non-unionist and have no use for organized tours through anthropomorphic paradises, I am left to my own, not negligible devices when I think of the best things in life; when, as now, I look back upon my almost couvade-like concern with our baby. You remember the discoveries we made (supposedly made by all parents): the perfect shape of the miniature fingernails of the hand you silently showed me as it lay, stranded starfish-wise, on your palm; the epidermic texture of limb and cheek, to which attention was drawn in dimmed, faraway tones, as if the softness of touch could be rendered only by the softness of distance; that swimming, sloping, elusive something about the dark-bluish tint of the iris which seemed still to retain the shadows it had absorbed of ancient, fabulous forests where there were more birds than tigers and more fruit than thorns, and where, in some dappled depth, man’s mind had been born; and, above all, an infant’s first journey into the next dimension, the newly established nexus between eye and reachable object, which the career boys in biometrics or in the rat-maze racket think they can explain. It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind’s birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird.

There is also keen pleasure (and, after all, what else should the pursuit of science produce?) in meeting the riddle of the initial blossoming of man’s mind by postulating a voluptuous pause in the growth of the rest of nature, a lolling and loafing which allowed first of all the formation of Homo poeticus—without which sapiens could not have been evolved. “Struggle for life” indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar, to the grunting beast’s crazy obsession with the search for food. You and I have frequently remarked upon that maniacal glint in a housewife’s scheming eye as it roves over food in a grocery or about the morgue of a butcher’s shop. Toilers of the world, disband! Old books are wrong. The world was made on a Sunday.

2

Throughout the years of our boy’s infancy, in Hitler’s Germany and Maginot’s France, we were more or less constantly hard up, but wonderful friends saw to his having the best things available. Although powerless to do much about it, you and I jointly kept a jealous eye on any possible rift between his childhood and our own incunabula in the opulent past, and this is where those friendly fates came in, doctoring the rift every time it threatened to open. Then, too, the science of building up babies had made the same kind of phenomenal, streamlined progress that flying or tilling had—I, when nine months old, did not get a pound of strained spinach at one feeding or the juice of a dozen oranges per day; and the pediatric hygiene you adopted was incomparably more artistic and scrupulous than anything old nurses could have dreamed up when we were babes.

I think bourgeois fathers—wing-collar workers in pencil-striped pants, dignified, office-tied fathers, so different from young American veterans of today or from a happy, jobless Russian-born expatriate of fifteen years ago—will not understand my attitude toward our child. Whenever you held him up, replete with his warm formula and grave as an idol, and waited for the postlactic all-clear signal before making a horizontal baby of the vertical one, I used to take part both in your wait and in the tightness of his surfeit, which I exaggerated, therefore rather resenting your cheerful faith in the speedy dissipation of what I felt to be a painful oppression; and when, at last, the blunt little bubble did rise and burst in his solemn mouth, I used to experience a lovely relief while you, with a congratulatory murmur, bent low to deposit him in the white-rimmed twilight of his crib.

You know, I still feel in my wrists certain echoes of the pram-pusher’s knack, such as, for example, the glib downward pressure one applied to the handle in order to have the carriage tip up and climb the curb. First came an elaborate mouse-gray vehicle of Belgian make, with fat autoid tires and luxurious springs, so large that it could not enter our puny elevator. It rolled on sidewalks in slow stately mystery, with the trapped baby inside lying supine, well covered with down, silk and fur; only his eyes moved, warily, and sometimes they turned upward with one swift sweep of their showy lashes to follow the receding of branch-patterned blueness that flowed away from the edge of the half-cocked hood of the carriage, and presently he would dart a suspicious glance at my face to see if the teasing trees and sky did not belong, perhaps, to the same order of things as did rattles and parental humor. There followed a lighter carriage, and in this, as he spun along, he would tend to rise, straining at his straps; clutching at the edges; standing there less like the groggy passenger of a pleasure boat than like an entranced scientist in a spaceship; surveying the speckled skeins of a live, warm world; eyeing with philosophic interest the pillow he had managed to throw overboard; falling out himself when a strap burst one day. Still later he rode in one of those small contraptions called strollers; from initial springy and secure heights the child came lower and lower, until, when he was about one and a half, he touched ground in front of the moving stroller by slipping forward out of his seat and beating the sidewalk with his heels in anticipation of being set loose in some public garden. A new wave of evolution started to swell, gradually lifting him again from the ground, when, for his second birthday, he received a four-foot-long, silver-painted Mercedes racing car operated by inside pedals, like an organ, and in this he used to drive with a pumping, clanking noise up and down the sidewalk of the Kurfürstendamm while from open windows came the multiplied roar of a dictator still pounding his chest in the Neander valley we had left far behind.

It might be rewarding to go into the phylogenetic aspects of the passion male children have for things on wheels, particularly railway trains. Of course, we know what the Viennese Quack thought of the matter. We will leave him and his fellow travelers to jog on, in their third-class carriage of thought, through the police state of sexual myth (incidentally, what a great mistake on the part of dictators to ignore psychoanalysis—a whole generation might be so easily corrupted that way!). Rapid growth, quantum-quick thought, the roller coaster of the circulatory system—all forms of vitality are forms of velocity, and no wonder a growing child desires to out-Nature Nature by filling a minimum stretch of time with a maximum of spatial enjoyment. Innermost in man is the spiritual pleasure derivable from the possibilities of outtugging and outrunning gravity, of overcoming or re-enacting the earth’s pull. The miraculous paradox of smooth round objects conquering space by simply tumbling over and over, instead of laboriously lifting heavy limbs in order to progress, must have given young mankind a most salutary shock. The bonfire into which the dreamy little savage peered as he squatted on naked haunches, or the unswerving advance of a forest fire—these have also affected, I suppose, a chromosome or two behind Lamarck’s back, in the mysterious way which Western geneticists are as disinclined to elucidate as are professional physicists to discuss the outside of the inside, the whereabouts of the curvature; for every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows—a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again.

But whatever the truth may be, we shall never forget, you and I, we shall forever defend, on this or some other battleground, the bridges on which we spent hours waiting with our little son (aged anything from two to six) for a train to pass below. I have seen older and less happy children stop for a moment in order to lean over the railing and spit into the asthmatic stack of the engine that happened to pass under, but neither you nor I is ready to admit that the more normal of two children is the one who resolves pragmatically the aimless exaltation of an obscure trance. You did nothing to curtail or rationalize those hour-long stops on windy bridges when, with an optimism and a patience that knew no bounds, our child would hope for a semaphore to click and for a growing locomotive to take shape at a point where all the many tracks converged, in the distance, between the blank backs of houses. On cold days he wore a lambskin coat, with a similar cap, both a brownish color mottled with rimelike gray, and these, and mittens, and the fervency of his faith kept him glowing, and kept you warm too, since all you had to do to prevent your delicate fingers from freezing was to hold one of his hands alternately in your right and left, switching every minute or so, and marveling at the incredible amount of heat generated by a big baby’s body.

3

Besides dreams of velocity, or in connection with them, there is in every child the essentially human urge to reshape the earth, to act upon a friable environment (unless he is a born Marxist or a corpse and meekly waits for the environment to fashion him). This explains a child’s delight in digging, in making roads and tunnels for his favorite toys. Our son had a tiny model of Sir Malcolm Campbell’s Bluebird, of painted steel and with detachable tires, and this he would play with endlessly on the ground, and the sun would make a kind of nimbus of his longish fair hair and turn to a toffee tint his bare back crisscrossed by the shoulder straps of his knitted navy-blue shorts (under which, when undressed, he was seen to be bottomed and haltered with natural white). Never in my life have I sat on so many benches and park chairs, stone slabs and stone steps, terrace parapets and brims of fountain basins as I did in those days. The popular pine barrens around the lake in Berlin’s Grunewald we visited but seldom. You questioned the right of a place to call itself a forest when it was so full of refuse, so much more littered with rubbish than the glossy, self-conscious streets of the adjoining town. Curious things turned up in this Grunewald. The sight of an iron bedstead exhibiting the anatomy of its springs in the middle of a glade or the presence of a dressmaker’s black dummy lying under a hawthorn bush in bloom made one wonder who, exactly, had troubled to carry these and other widely scattered articles to such remote points of a pathless forest. Once I came across a badly disfigured but still alert mirror, full of sylvan reflections—drunk, as it were, on a mixture of beer and chartreuse—leaning, with surrealistic jauntiness, against a tree trunk. Perhaps such intrusions on these burgherish pleasure grounds were a fragmentary vision of the mess to come, a prophetic bad dream of destructive explosions, something like the heap of dead heads the seer Cagliostro glimpsed in the ha-ha of a royal garden. And nearer to the lake, in summer, especially on Sundays, the place was infested with human bodies in various stages of nudity and solarization. Only the squirrels and certain caterpillars kept their coats on. Gray-footed goodwives sat on greasy gray sand in their slips; repulsive, seal-voiced males, in muddy swimming trunks, gamboled around; remarkably comely but poorly groomed girls, destined to bear a few years later—early in 1946, to be exact—a sudden crop of infants with Turkic or Mongol blood in their innocent veins, were chased and slapped on the rear (whereupon they would cry out, “Ow-wow!”); and the exhalations coming from these unfortunate frolickers, and their shed clothes (neatly spread out here and there on the ground) mingled with the stench of stagnant water to form an inferno of odors that, somehow, I have never found duplicated anywhere else. People in Berlin’s public gardens and city parks were not permitted to undress; but shirts might be unbuttoned, and rows of young men, of a pronounced Nordic type, sat with closed eyes on benches and exposed their frontal and pectoral pimples to the nationally approved action of the sun. The squeamish and possibly exaggerated shudder that obtains in these notes may be attributed, I suppose, to the constant fear we lived in of some contamination affecting our child. You always considered abominably trite, and not devoid of a peculiar Philistine flavor, the notion that small boys, in order to be delightful, should hate to wash and love to kill.

I would like to remember every small park we visited; I would like to have the ability Professor Jack, of Harvard and the Arnold Arboretum, told his students he had of identifying twigs with his eyes shut, merely from the sound of their swish through the air (“Hornbeam, honeysuckle, Lombardy poplar. Ah—a folded Transcript”). Quite often, of course, I can determine the geographic position of this or that park by some particular trait or combination of traits: dwarf-box edgings along narrow gravel walks, all of which meet like people in plays; a low blue bench against a cuboid hedge of yew; a square bed of roses framed in a border of heliotrope—these features are obviously associated with small park areas at street intersections in suburban Berlin. Just as clearly, a chair of thin iron, with its spidery shadow lying beneath it a little to one side of center, or a pleasantly supercilious, although plainly psychopathic, rotatory sprinkler, with a private rainbow hanging in its spray above gemmed grass, spells a Parisian park; but, as you will well understand, the eye of memory is so firmly focused upon a small figure squatting on the ground (loading a toy truck with pebbles or contemplating the bright, wet rubber of a gardener’s hose to which some of the gravel over which the hose has just slithered adheres) that the various loci—Berlin, Prague, Franzensbad, Paris, the Riviera, Paris again, Cap d’Antibes and so forth—lose all sovereignty, pool their petrified generals and fallen leaves, cement the friendship of their interlocked paths, and unite in a federation of light and shade through which bare-kneed, graceful children drift on whirring roller skates.

Now and then a recognized patch of historical background aids local identification—and substitutes other bonds for those a personal vision suggests. Our child must have been almost three on that breezy day in Berlin (where, of course, no one could escape familiarity with the ubiquitous picture of the Führer) when we stood, he and I, before a bed of pallid pansies, each of their upturned faces showing a dark mustache-like smudge, and had great fun, at my rather silly prompting, commenting on their resemblance to a crowd of bobbing little Hitlers. Likewise, I can name a blooming garden in Paris as the place where I noticed, in 1938 or 1939, a quiet girl of ten or so, with a deadpan white face, looking, in her dark, shabby, unseasonable clothes, as if she had escaped from an orphanage (congruously, I was granted a later glimpse of her being swept away by two flowing nuns), who had deftly tied a live butterfly to a thread and was promenading the pretty, weakly fluttering, slightly crippled insect on that elfish leash (the by-product, perhaps, of a good deal of dainty needlework in that orphanage). You have often accused me of unnecessary callousness in my matter-of-fact entomological investigations on our trips to the Pyrenees or the Alps; so, if I diverted our child’s attention from that would-be Titania, it was not because I pitied her Red Admirable (Admiral, in vulgar parlance) but because there was some vaguely repulsive symbolism about her sullen sport. I may have been reminded, in fact, of the simple, old-fashioned trick a French policeman had—and no doubt still has—when leading a florid-nosed workman, a Sunday rowdy, away to jail, of turning him into a singularly docile and even alacritous satellite by catching a kind of small fishhook in the man’s uncared-for but sensitive and responsive flesh. You and I did our best to encompass with vigilant tenderness the trustful tenderness of our child but were inevitably confronted by the fact that the filth left by hoodlums in a sandbox on a playground was the least serious of possible offenses, and that the horrors which former generations had mentally dismissed as anachronisms or things occurring only in remote khanates and mandarinates, were all around us.

As time went on and the shadow of fool-made history vitiated even the exactitude of sundials, we moved more restlessly over Europe, and it seemed as if not we but those gardens and parks traveled along. Le Nôtre’s radiating avenues and complicated parterres were left behind, like sidetracked trains. In Prague, to which we journeyed to show our child to my mother in the spring of 1937, there was Stromovka Park, with its atmosphere of free undulating remoteness beyond man-trained arbors. You will also recall those rock gardens of Alpine plants—sedums and saxifrages—that escorted us, so to speak, into the Savoy Alps, joining us on a vacation (paid for by something my translators had sold), and then followed us back into the towns of the plains. Cuffed hands of wood nailed to boles in the old parks of curative resorts pointed in the direction whence came a subdued thumping of bandstand music. An intelligent walk accompanied the main driveway; not everywhere paralleling it but freely recognizing its guidance, and from duck pond or lily pool gamboling back to join the procession of plane trees at this or that point where the park had developed a city-father fixation and dreamed up a monument. Roots, roots of remembered greenery, roots of memory and pungent plants, roots, in a word, are enabled to traverse long distances by surmounting some obstacles, penetrating others and insinuating themselves into narrow cracks. So those gardens and parks traversed Central Europe with us. Graveled walks gathered and stopped at a rond-point to watch you or me bend and wince as we looked for a ball under a privet hedge where, on the dark, damp earth, nothing but a perforated mauve trolley ticket or a bit of soiled gauze and cotton wool could be detected. A circular seat would go around a thick oak trunk to see who was sitting on the other side and find there a dejected old man reading a foreign-language newspaper and picking his nose. Glossy-leaved evergreens enclosing a lawn where our child discovered his first live frog broke into a trimmed maze of topiary work, and you said you thought it was going to rain. At some farther stage, under less leaden skies, there was a great show of rose dells and pleached alleys, and trellises swinging their creepers, ready to turn into the vines of columned pergolas if given a chance, or, if not, to disclose the quaintest of quaint public toilets, a miserable chalet-like affair of doubtful cleanliness, with a woman attendant in black, black-knitting on its porch.

Down a slope, a flagged path stepped cautiously, putting the same foot first every time, through an iris garden; under beeches; and then was transformed into a fast-moving earthy trail patterned with rough imprints of horse hooves. The gardens and parks seemed to move ever faster as our child’s legs grew longer, and when he was about four, the trees and flowering shrubs turned resolutely toward the sea. Like a bored Stationmaster seen standing alone on the speed-clipped platform of some small station at which one’s train does not stop, this or that gray park watchman receded as the park streamed on and on, carrying us south toward the orange trees and the arbutus and the chick-fluff of mimosas and the pâte tendre of an impeccable sky.

Graded gardens on hillsides, a succession of terraces whose every stone step ejected a gaudy grasshopper, dropped from ledge to ledge seaward, with the olives and the oleanders fairly toppling over each other in their haste to obtain a view of the beach. There our child kneeled motionless to be photographed in a quivering haze of sun against the scintillation of the sea, which is a milky blur in the snapshots we have preserved but was, in life, silvery blue, with great patches of purple-blue farther out, caused by warm currents in collaboration with and corroboration of (hear the pebbles rolled by the withdrawing wave?) eloquent old poets and their smiling similes. And among the candy-like blobs of sea-licked glass—lemon, cherry, peppermint—and the banded pebbles, and the little fluted shells with lustered insides, sometimes small bits of pottery, still beautiful in glaze and color, turned up. They were brought to you or me for inspection, and if they had indigo chevrons, or bands of leaf ornament, or any kind of gay emblemata, and were judged precious, down they went with a click into the toy pail, and, if not, a plop and a flash marked their return to the sea. I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scrollwork fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by her mother a hundred years ago—and so on, until this assortment of parts, if all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl, broken by some Italian child, God knows where and when, and now mended by these rivets of bronze.

In the fall of 1939, we returned to Paris, and around May 20 of the following year we were again near the sea, this time on the western coast of France, at St. Nazaire. There, one last little garden surrounded us, as you and I, and our child, by now six, between us, walked through it on our way to the docks, where, behind the buildings facing us, the liner Champlain was waiting to take us to New York. That garden was what the French call, phonetically, skwarr and the Russians skver, perhaps because it is the kind of thing usually found in or near public squares in England. Laid out on the last limit of the past and on the verge of the present, it remains in my memory merely as a geometrical design which no doubt I could easily fill in with the colors of plausible flowers, if I were careless enough to break the hush of pure memory that (except, perhaps, for some chance tinnitus due to the pressure of my own tired blood) I have left undisturbed, and humbly listened to, from the beginning. What I really remember about this neutrally blooming design, is its clever thematic connection with transatlantic gardens and parks; for suddenly, as we came to the end of its path, you and I saw something that we did not immediately point out to our child, so as to enjoy in full the blissful shock, the enchantment and glee he would experience on discovering ahead the ungenuinely gigantic, the unrealistically real prototype of the various toy vessels he had doddled about in his bath. There, in front of us, where a broken row of houses stood between us and the harbor, and where the eye encountered all sorts of stratagems, such as pale-blue and pink underwear cakewalking on a clothesline, or a lady’s bicycle and a striped cat oddly sharing a rudimentary balcony of cast iron, it was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship’s funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—Find What the Sailor Has Hidden—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen.

***About The Author***

Vladimir Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg on April 23, 1899. His family fled to the Crimea in 1917, during the Bolshevik Revolution, then went into exile in Europe. Nabokov studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, earning a degree in French and Russian literature in 1922, and lived in Berlin and Paris for the next two decades, writing prolifically, mainly in Russian, under the pseudonym Sirin. In 1940 he moved to the United States, where he pursued a brilliant literary career (as a poet, novelist, memoirist, critic, and translator) while teaching Russian, creative writing, and literature at Stanford, Wellesley, Cornell, and Harvard. The monumental success of his novel Lolita (1955) enabled him to give up teaching and devote himself fully to his writing. In 1961 he moved to Montreux, Switzerland, where he died in 1977. Recognized as one of the master prose stylists of the century in both Russian and English, he translated a number of his original English works—including Lolita—into Russian, and collaborated on English translations of his original Russian works.

## The Charm before the Storm

Lrb | 9 July 1987

Mary-Kay Wilmers helped to found the *LRB* in 1979 and was its editor for many years. Her pieces have been collected as Human Relations and Other Difficulties. She is now the paper’s consulting editor.

*Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov.

Penguin, 242 pp., £3.95, May 1987, 0 14 008623 4

*The Russian Album* by Michael Ignatieff.

Chatto, 191 pp., £12.95, May 1987, 0 7011 3109 8

*The Making of a Peacemonger: The Memoirs of George Ignatieff* prepared in association with by Sonja Sinclair.

Toronto, 265 pp., £15, July 1985, 0 8020 2556 0

*A Little of All These: An Estonian Childhood* by Tania Alexander. Cape, 165 pp., £12.50, March 1987, 0 224 02400 0

Stuck in the country, bored and vaguely discontented, with themselves, their lives or the way things are, half the heroes in Russian fiction appear to be waiting for something to happen while the other half, in varying degrees of relief or despair, settle down to the thought that nothing will – not in their lifetime. Tolstoy might not have made so much of Levin’s contentment had contentment not been so hard to find. These are large and uneasy generalisations, but it can sometimes seem as if most of what was written in Russia before 1917 was written in the expectation of upheaval.

Thoughts of this kind are prompted by reading about the lives of some of those who left Russia in the years that followed the Revolution and were sustained in their exile by a sense of fabulous loss. Nabokov, whose account of his Russian childhood, Speak, Memory, must be one of the best books the Revolution produced, sometimes thought in later life of revisiting the places on which his memory fastened, while knowing that to do so would have been preposterous, an indignity. The reasons for not going back had as much to do with art as with politics. His family had always spent time abroad and between 1904 and 1905 were away for nearly a year. In Speak, Memory he writes about the moment in their journey home when the train reached the Russian border: ‘now, sixty years later’, it seems to him ‘a rehearsal – not of the grand homecoming that will never take place, but of its constant dream in my long years of exile’. The upheaval when at last it arrived was so violent, and for those who left the severance so abrupt, that coming home could never be a match for staying away. Inside Nabokov’s head the places he had known as a child had an enchanted existence: to have seen them again would have been pointless.

The analogy that comes to mind is with the First World War and the feverish nostalgia for Edwardian privilege that it set in train; and although one may not have much sympathy for the sound of the upper classes weeping over their losses, it isn’t always easy (or necessary) to resist their sad chronicles of the charm before the storm, with every moment cherished in retrospective anticipation of its loss. Nabokov writes about his mother reading to him at bedtime and recalls the ring on her hand as she turned the pages of the book. He then imagines that he might have seen reflected in its facets ‘a room, people, lights, trees in the rain – a whole period of émigré life for which that ring was to pay’. As the storm approached, his mother, like him, cultivated her memories. It was, he says, a family disease. ‘She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervour that I now do her image and my past. Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate.’

Michael Ignatieff was born in Canada in the 1940s. ‘My friends,’ he remarks a little sheepishly at the start of his book, ‘had suburban pasts or pasts they would rather not talk about. I had a past of Tsarist adventurers, survivors of revolutions, heroic exiles.’ His family, aristocrats like Nabokov’s, had like Nabokov’s served the Tsars for several generations, and left Russia in the wake of the Revolution, disillusioned with the old autocracy and appalled by the new one. The Russian Album is about their memories, a record of what they had and how they lost it, a writer’s tribute to the historical significance of other people’s lives. It is also, as his first chapter carefully explains and his last pages mysteriously deny, a book about himself and his inheritance – even more intangible property, unreal estate.

‘My earliest memories,’ Ignatieff says, ‘are not memories of myself, but of my father talking about his ancestors.’ At the time of the February Revolution, George Ignatieff, Michael’s father, and the author of The Making of a Peacemonger, was four, ‘just old enough’, his son writes, ‘to remember the bayonets glinting like glass below the window of the house in Petrograd on the morning the soldiers stormed to the Duma and said they had had enough of hunger and war’; by October the Ignatieff family, mother, father, five sons and ten servants, were living in a rented house in the Caucasus. In May 1919 they left Russia; and a few months later, the five boys and their father stood in Pall Mall as General Haig marched by at the head of an Allied victory parade that included no Russian contingents. (‘Remember, Russia is a defeated nation,’ their English nanny remarked with some satisfaction to the defeated Russian family of whom she had charge.) Repeatedly warned by their parents that they ‘must not end up like so many émigrés driving taxis and keeping their bags packed for the return journey to Petersburg’, the children, of whom George was the youngest, set about finding work with what readers of Russian novels might think of as a very un-Russian sense of life’s possibilities. George was 14 when he followed his older brothers to Canada and, as he describes it in his own memoirs, it was during his first summer there, working on the Canadian Pacific Railway, that he dumped the émigré baggage for good. ‘The promotion I earned that summer, from axeman to rodman, had done more for my self-esteem than any number of inherited titles.’

The matter of inherited titles is an important one in George Ignatieff’s book, as is the family tradition of public service which got the Ignatieffs their estates and their title. His great-grandfather, rewarded by Nicholas I for the support which he gave him in the Decembrist revolt, was commander of the Corps des Pages for twenty-five years, and presided late in life over Alexander II’s Council of Ministers; his grandfather, Count Nicholas, described by Lord Salisbury as ‘an amusing, joking man without regard for the truth’, negotiated the treaty which concluded the Russo-Turkish War and, as Alexander III’s Minister of the Interior, re-organised the secret police and introduced the legislation which kept the autocracy safe in their hands for the next thirty-five years; his father, born in the Russian Embassy in Constantinople, was the Tsars’ last and very popular Minister of Education. Exile entailed a different allegiance; it didn’t put an end to the family tradition. George Ignatieff joined the Canadian foreign service in June 1940 and retired thirty years later, one of Canada’s most senior diplomats and its leading expert on disarmament.

In 1955 he returned to Russia for the first time, accompanying Lester Pearson on an official visit to Moscow. It wasn’t a happy occasion; he felt out of place, there was too much to eat and drink, his Russian was rusty, the talks were unproductive, and he resented the fact that Khrushchev addressed him as ‘Count’ or, sometimes, ‘ex-Count’: ‘I felt compelled to point out that as a Canadian I preferred to be called plain Mr.’ That was the main trouble: as far as his hosts were concerned he wasn’t a Canadian at all. The effect was predictable – he never felt more Canadian in his life. ‘My return to Ottawa,’ he says at the end of the chapter, ‘was a homecoming in the truest sense of the term.’

Twenty-odd years later he went back to Russia again, this time with his son Michael, to find what traces they could of the family history. His grandfather’s estate in the Ukraine, now a village school, was off-limits; the one near Smolensk, bequeathed to his mother’s family by Catherine the Great, had been burned to the ground in 1917; the house in St Petersburg from which he and his brothers had watched the beginnings of the February Revolution was now the Leningrad Palace of Marriages, mothers with pins in their mouths adjusting their daughters’ dresses in what had once been the family schoolroom; in Kislovodsk in the Caucasus one September afternoon they found the green gate that led into the garden of the last house in which they had lived on their way out of Russia – the house still there but with several others crammed into the space around it. These visits elicited a more obvious emotional response, but they feature in his son’s book, not in his. Nabokov’s retrospective fervour, and the sense of permanent displacement that invigorates his writing, seem to have skipped a generation in the case of the Ignatieffs, père et fils. A certain sort of cliché would say that it is only artists who are affected or afflicted by things of this kind: but maybe artists are the only people who can put them to good use.

Both George Ignatieff and his eldest brother had wanted to write the family history but one died quite young and the other was too busy. Their parents, Michael Ignatieff’s grandparents, wrote (unpublished) memoirs of their own lives, his a dry public document, hers a jumble of memories, written in English for her grandchildren to read. They died in Canada, towards the end of the Second World War, not long before Michael Ignatieff was born. Apart from their memoirs, they left behind a few objects – a silver ewer and basin which Michael’s maternal great-grandmother used to wash her hands when she woke up in the morning at her country estate; a diamond star given to his other great-grandmother, a former Princess Galitzine, by the Sultan of Turkey – some photographs, and as far as their grandson was concerned, a very powerful sense of a past which both was and wasn’t his, which had been lost and which it was his business to recover.

Ten years ago he decided in his turn to write the family history, or some part of it. Having at first thought to tell his grandparents’ story in its historical setting and, later, to make them into the characters of a novel, he has settled for something in between the two which has qualities of both and moves without effort between historical upheaval and domestic upset. Based to an undefined extent on his grandparents’ memoirs, The Russian Album shares or plausibly re-creates – there’s no knowing which – their sense of what happened to them, and though he doesn’t quite give the impression that he was there at the time, one can sometimes imagine him as a young Anglo-Saxon, rather like the narrator in William Gerhardie’s novel Futility, standing unobtrusively to the side of the action, a little in love with the lives he’s describing and at the same time worried about these people on whom so many difficulties have been inflicted, his grandmother especially.

She was born Princess Natasha Mestchersky in 1877. The youngest of eight children, she was awkward and shy, and at puberty she stopped eating. The doctors were summoned – ‘one so eminent he sent along an assistant beforehand to test the chairs he was to sit on’; they prescribed (those were the days) a trip to the Riviera, where she was made to eat poudre de viande sandwiches and told she was spoilt. When her father died she became her mother’s companion, in winter pushing her Bath chair along the Promenade des Anglais; in summer reading her Carlyle’s History of Frederick the Great. It was by then the sort of sad, worthy life that Russian novels are full of and when she came to write her memoirs it was clear that, like Nabokov’s mother, she had committed every detail to memory.

She met Paul Ignatieff in Cannes in February 1903 and they were married six weeks later in an Orthodox church in Nice. The trunk which carried her trousseau back to Russia is now in an attic above the garage of her oldest surviving son’s house in Richmond, Quebec, empty, covered in dust, but with the label still intact of the shop in the Rue St Honoré from which it had been ordered. In Speak, Memory Nabokov remembers playing cards with his mother on a train journey through Germany in 1909. ‘Although it was still broad daylight, our cards, a glass and, on a different plane, the locks of a suitcase were reflected in the window.’ The suitcase had been bought for his mother’s wedding trip to Florence in 1897. In 1917 it had carried a handful of her jewellery from St Petersburg, via the Crimea, to London. After her death it became his, accompanying him on his passage through more than two hundred motel rooms and rented houses in 46 American States. ‘The fact,’ he writes, ‘that of our Russian heritage the hardiest survivor proved to be a travelling bag is both logical and emblematic.’

The Ignatieff marriage wasn’t very happy; at least Natasha didn’t think it was – disgruntled husbands are a feature of our times more than theirs – and she blamed herself for its failures. Her husband was a quiet, melancholy man whom other people seemed to find more charming than she did. In his youth he’d been anxious and asthmatic, and like her, was sent to France, to Charcot’s clinic in Paris. He spent six months there, reading Tolstoy and thinking Levin-like thoughts about the wisdom of the Russian peasant and the need for the aristocrat to return to the soil. ‘It is only by putting on the chains of service that man can fulfil his destiny on earth,’ he wrote, ominously, in a cousin’s commonplace book; and when he’d finished his military service he went back to the Ignatieff estate at Kroupodernitsa, to the life of a working farmer and a dutiful son. It wasn’t a life that appealed to Natasha and the feeling one gets reading her grandson’s account of the first year of her marriage is that it was also the first year of her exile.

Fifteen years later the Ignatieffs bought another farm, on the Sussex coast between Hastings and Battle. ‘Paul called it Kroupodernitsa ... Just turned 50, he thought he would go back to his beginnings, to the days when he farmed his father’s estate.’ He hadn’t, in fact, stayed on his father’s estate for long. ‘The chains of service’ – the Ignatieffs are always ‘dutiful’, never ‘ambitious’ – drew him to Kiev, where within 18 months of his marriage he was appointed chairman of the zemstvo; in 1905, in the middle of the first revolution, he was made governor of the province; in 1908 he was invited to join the Ministry of Agriculture in St Petersburg. Initially pleased to leave Kroupodernitsa, Natasha had dreaded moving into the governor’s mansion: she dreaded St Petersburg, the cold North and the exalted social atmosphere, even more. By then she had four children. Before setting off for the capital she took them to the seaside for a holiday. There was typhoid in the water supply and the youngest child died. It was at that point, Paul said in his memoirs, that she began to lose interest in the rest of the world. At the end of 1916 she lost another son, born prematurely. But by then Rasputin was running the country and there were angry demonstrations in the streets of Moscow and Petrograd. Natasha believed the child had been taken to spare him a future of which she was terrified.

Michael Ignatieff’s account of the collapse of the Tsarist autocracy and of his grandfather’s attempts to stave it off is admirably lucid. Paul took the post at the Ministry of Agriculture just as his friends – Nabokov’s father, for instance – were beginning to distance themselves from the regime. Though he was in many ways no less liberal than they were, and no less convinced of Nicholas II’s hopeless stupidity, he held on for much longer than was reasonable to the Slavophile’s belief in the mystical union of the Tsar and his people. In 1915, in the middle of a disastrous war, when almost everyone he knew, however right-wing or left-wing, had given up hope, he became a member of the Cabinet, and as Minister of Education introduced a series of reforms which the Tsarina did her best to impede. A year later he was dismissed, and took to his bed with a return of all the symptoms which Charcot had evidently been unable to cure. Three thousand people wrote to him to signal their dismay, and when the family left St Petersburg his former colleagues from the Ministry of Education were at the station to say goodbye to their chief.

With Paul in his bed Natasha took over. Something of that sort was no doubt happening all over St Petersburg. One can see it, for instance, in Tania Alexander’s A Little of All These, which isn’t so much the story of her own Estonian childhood as an account of the life and loves of her monstrous mother, Moura Budberg. At the beginning of 1918, as the Revolution spread northwards, Mrs Alexander’s father, a member of the Baltic nobility and former aide-de-camp to the Tsar, went back to Estonia to guard his estate. The children followed a few months later. Their mother stayed behind in St Petersburg where her own mother was ill – and took the opportunity to ditch her husband for the more magnetic Robert Bruce Lockhart. In this, as in most things, Moura Budberg’s behaviour was unusual. Even so, Mrs Alexander is right to speak of the strength of character which, like Natasha Ignatieff or Nabokov’s mother, she showed in adjusting to the loss of her position, her wealth and her household. One might want to shrug one’s shoulders and say that no one had much choice in the matter until one remembers that Natasha’s husband didn’t effectively get out of bed until somewhere around 1920: in May 1919, when the family left Russia, he was too weak to walk and was carried up the gangplank of the British steamship that took them to Constantinople on a stretcher. So when Mrs Alexander says that ‘Russian women of that pre-Revolutionary generation were more resilient than their menfolk,’ it might be as well not to dismiss the remark on the grounds of its being a cliché – perhaps it’s a cliché because the wives were by and large more resilient than their husbands.

There are, however, other things to say on that score. Djon von Benckendorff, Mrs Alexander’s father, was murdered in April 1918, a victim presumably of revolutionary violence. In 1922 Nabokov’s father, a minor official in Kerensky’s government, was assassinated in Berlin by a Russian fascist, ‘a sinister ruffian whom, during World War Two, Hitler made administrator of émigré Russian affairs’. As long as she remained in Russia Natasha Ignatieff was sustained by anti-Bolshevik rage. At the time of the February Revolution, she had closed the curtains, turned off the lights and told the children’s tutors on no account to let the boys near the windows: the scene below, she said in her memoirs, was ‘atrocious, shameful, never to be forgotten’. It wasn’t a show and the boys weren’t to watch. (Not unnaturally, they didn’t agree and crept back to the windows when she wasn’t looking.) ‘Calm yourself, dear,’ Paul kept saying to his wife as he lay in bed nursing his own more complicated despair.

In Paris, on the first leg of their exile, she went, briefly, to cookery school, where, before her money ran out, she learnt how to make risotto and marrons glacés – the staple of endless meals which she cooked but didn’t herself eat; she listened to her children’s chatter; when they were older bought them Turkish cigarettes; and all the while became more and more grievously homesick. The English Kroupodernitsa wasn’t the success they had hoped; and while Paul spent his evenings ‘doing the accounts’ with a Miss Adams Brown, Natasha would take a glass of port up to the bathroom and lie, muttering, in the bath. When eventually Paul took off for Paris – there at least ‘he still counted for something’ – her sons, now more or less grown-up, sold the farm and arranged for Natasha to join them in Canada. She settled down the best she could, but the summer she enjoyed most, even after Paul had returned to her, was the summer she spent writing her memoirs. Memory, she said, ‘quite flew me back to my happy past’. Nothing Michael Ignatieff says about her past makes it seem very happy to us: it was exile’s great trick to make it seem so to her.

**Other lrb refs:**

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v12/n10/john-sturrock/rhino-breeder

Rhino-Breeder

John Sturrock, 24 May 1990

Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977

edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew Bruccoli.

“... and wrote a memoir of his early life – Conclusive Evidence, later to be called Speak, Memory – he defines it to a potential publisher as a hybrid between unqualified autobiography and a novel, the truth crossed with fiction, his life having been given ‘a definite plot’. Nabokov redrafts the old autobiographical contract in favour of the ...”

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n13/john-lanchester/be-interesting

Be interesting!

John Lanchester: Martin Amis, 6 July 2000

Experience

by Martin Amis.

“... for some reason it is usually a man) sits down to tell the story of his life. Nabokov’s Speak, Memory is in this and other respects an important book, and it also establishes the defining problem of the genre, which is how to give the memoir an artistically gratifying shape while remaining true to the messiness and quotidianness of lived life. It’s a ...”

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v12/n24/michael-ignatieff/buttoned

Buttoned

Michael Ignatieff, 20 December 1990

Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years

by Brian Boyd.

“... the artist himself has left behind a masterpiece of autobiography? Anyone who has read Speak, Memory comes to Nabokov’s fiction with an absolutely clear impression of the superbly vital, arrogant, enchantingly attentive and amusing person he must have been in life. Boyd cannot compete with Speak, Memory: he can only ...”

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n21/patricia-lockwood/eat-butterflies-with-me

Eat butterflies with me?

Patricia Lockwood, 5 November 2020

Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews and Letters to the Editor

by Vladimir Nabokov, edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy.

“... Strong Opinions​, a collection of Nabokov’s interviews, reviews and essays published in 1973, contains an interview with the great man so brazenly bad, so shocking in each successive clause, that as long as you’re reading it, you’re dreaming of the movie version. Picture Benedict Cumberbatch hunched over a legal pad, sweating lightly, pressing Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (Jared Harris) to admit that a sentence about a character paring his fingernails was inspired by James Joyce ...”